Frescoes in the Muslim residence and bathhouse
Qusayr ‘Amra

Representations, some of the Dionysiac cycle, made by Christian painters from Egypt

Mab van Lohuizen-Mulder

In the desert, about eighty kilometers to the East of Amman, lies Qusayr ‘Amra, a small building, as the name is indicating (Fig. 1). It belongs to the group of so-called desert castles. It consists of a bath-cum-audience hall, fully decorated with a wealth of frescoes, some rather enigmatic. The representation of nude and semi-nude dancers, musicians and some other nude rather impressive women is not so common in an Islamic building from the eighth century A.D., although one cannot uphold the view that the representation of human figures in a secular building is forbidden in the Koran. But it is true that, apart from the palace buildings Khirbat al-Mafjar near Jericho and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi in Syria both with baths, no other Umayyad building from the seventh or eighth century is found with such a wealth of representations of human beings.

A definite answer to questions about who was the patron and the owner of the building, about the style of the frescoes and the origin of the artists and about the iconography has still to be given. Many scholars of Islamic art and culture and among them one of the greatest, Oleg Grabar, have written important and in some respect revealing articles on these frescoes. I know that a new attempt to try to come a little further in explaining these paintings is very daring. Being well aware of the importance of these representations in the context of a better understanding of early-Islamic art gave me the courage to undertake further research.

THE PATRON OF THE BUILDING

It seems that two Umayyad caliphs are the possible builders: al-Walid I and al-Walid II. We know of a dating post quem: there is evidence that these frescoes are probably not painted before 711 A.D and certainly not before 710. In 711 al-Walid I conquered al-Andalus by killing Roderic, the Visigothic King of Spain, who had become king only a year before. Roderic is represented in the fresco of the Six Kings with an inscription above his head mentioning his name, like the other rulers who are also designated by an inscription with their name. To show the power of the Umayyad Dynasty it is understandable that some kings are shown, like Roderic and the Sasanian ruler, who were actually conquered by a caliph. Still this does not solve the question about who was the one who gave the commission. It could have been al-Walid I, who built the Great Mosque at Damascus between 705 and 715. In my view, however, there are several reasons for giving al-Walid II the honor. One reason is that he was the one who was for a long time a prince, an amir and not yet a caliph. He got this status only in 743. In an inscription on the frescoes an amir, not a caliph is mentioned, clearly as the builder and the patron of the castle. It is said that al-Walid II actually built the far greater and more elaborate palace building Khirbat al-Mafjar near Jericho for his uncle Hisham. So it is quite understandable that he also wanted to build for himself a bathhouse with a reception hall, that could be used also as a hunting lodge. But, not yet being a caliph, he could not afford to build for himself a large and luxurious bathhouse/castle like Khirbat al-Mafjar. But a small one was possible because it seems that his uncle Hisham gave him an allowance (which he regretted later on, because al-Walid seems to have misbehaved himself).

2 Talbot Rice 1965/1993, 28: “The nature of the mosaics, the stuccos and the paintings does suggest that already a style had been born... It was on the basis established in these early years that the future development of Islamic art was founded”.
3 Etinghausen 1977, 30.
4 O. Grabar 1954, 185-187; Grabar 1973, 43-46; Etinghausen and Grabar 1987/1994, 59; Fowden 1993, 143, 144. Also the Negus of Ethiopia, represented and labeled as one of the six in both Arabic and Greek, is indirectly conquered by the Umayyads. The Negus reigned in Yemen until he was defeated by the Sasanians. The Sasanians in their turn were conquered by the Umayyads. The Great Mosque in San ‘a’ is alleged to have been built by Walid I (Grabar 1992, The Mediation of Ornament, Princeton, 155).
I think that al-Walid I, who built such an extensive and costly mosque at Damascus and had a palace there, would never have been satisfied with a dwelling, built on such small scale. Qusayr ‘Amra would not have been up to his standard. But for al-Walid II this kind of small castle, decorated in the way it is, fitted perfectly well in his life style as an Umayyad prince as it is described in ancient documents. That the very large palace Mshatta is said to have been built by al-Walid II, during the time that he was really a caliph (743-744), is very well explainable and not contradictory to what is said above. As a caliph he would have thought Qusayr ‘Amra as not fitting any longer in many respects. He obviously felt the need to build a new castle with space for his whole retinue and showing at the same time his might and power.

THE STYLE OF THE FRESCOES AND THE NATIONALITY OF THE ARTISTS

The first thing that struck me when I visited Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi a fragment of a painting is found, a man’s face, which is said to look like a Fayum portrait. Therefore, why should there not have been an involvement of Alexandrian artisans in Qusayr ‘Amra as well? Egypt had been conquered by the Muslims already a long time ago and we know that the Muslim conquerors were quite impressed by houses and palaces in Alexandria still decorated in the Hellenistic manner. Pompeii and Boscoreale show us the vivid examples of that originally

See Coptic textiles with Gaea represented. Exhibition catalogue 1990/91, 33, 42, cat. 37; McKenzie 1990, 117. She speaks of craftsmen already brought from Alexandria to Petra at around AD 25 or between 86-62 BC.; see for this also Taylor 1993, 32 who mentions that craftsmen could have been brought from Alexandria by Aretas IV (around AD 25), but that the consensus now favors Aretas III (86-62 BC) as the importer of Alexandrian craftsmen.

Several scholars see in decorations and stucco busts from Khirbat al-Mafjar partly in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem clearly Coptic traits and characteristics. I have shown too that the mosaics in the Great Mosque at Damascus are probably of Coptic and more specifically of Alexandrian origin.

THE STYLE OF THE FRESCOES AND THE NATIONALITY OF THE ARTISTS

The first thing that struck me when I visited Qusayr ‘Amra was the representation of two lady dancers on the vaults in the reception hall (Figs. 2 a and b). An archaelogist I met in Amman, persuaded me to visit the place, especially mentioning these dancers. Knowing about my previous research she told me that I would find there more evidence to support my thesis of migrating and travelling artisans from Egypt. And I was not disappointed. These two ladies seem, by the way in which they are painted, by the expression of their faces, with their big eyes outlined in black, their specific long skirt and armlets. Another sarcophagus from Egypt in the University Museum in Amman for her help. But for al-Walid II this kind of small castle, decorated in the way it is, fitted perfectly well in his life style as an Umayyad prince as it is described in ancient documents. That the very large palace Mshatta is said to have been built by al-Walid II, during the time that he was really a caliph (743-744), is very well explainable and not contradictory to what is said above. As a caliph he would have thought Qusayr ‘Amra as not fitting any longer in many respects. He obviously felt the need to build a new castle with space for his whole retinue and showing at the same time his might and power.

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Alexandrian style. This style with its subtle coloring, far from being primitive, we find in Qusayr ‘Amra too. Trees and animals are painted here in a beautiful way. The impressionistic painting of the vegetation in many shades of green, like the different shades in the mosaics of Damascus, reminds us of frescoes and a mosaic in Pompeii, where leaves are rendered in the same manner. It is true, some paintings of human figures are a bit primitive, like the Gaea busts, in comparison with other paintings of human beings in Qusayr ‘Amra, but they could have been painted by local artisans who were also familiar with her as we have seen.

Textiles generally called Coptic show us that there must have been beautiful specimens of a style of high quality in Egypt in the time of the Muslim conquest, like the well-known textile fragments with fishes from Antinoë now in Paris and Lyons and a fragment of a tapestry with St. Theodore from Akhmim in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the Harvard University Art Museum. We must not forget that the diversity and richness of the cultural background in Egypt produced an art in that period that was not limited to what is generally called Coptic art, a kind of folk art far away from Graeco-Roman artistic traditions. The adherents of the Coptic Church, the Copts, included also sophisticated city-dwellers and among them artists, who were culturally not limited and who ordered and who made for example wall hangings in a far from primitive style, of which the above mentioned textile with the fishes is an example.

The paintings in Qusayr ‘Amra have a kinship with some of these textiles, as we have already mentioned. And this is, according to my view, not because of pattern books, but because of the fact that Egyptian painters were actually involved. Alexandrian/Coptic workmanship and labor must have been easily available.

To describe the identity of the artisans as being Egyptians is also underlined by other circumstantial evidence. In the part of the building, leading to the caldarium, the tepidarium, is a decoration on a wall in lozenges in the way Copts made decorations for example on textiles. A decoration which is very prominently present on arches – framing several scenes, like it is done many times on Coptic textiles – (Fig. 5) also reminds us of some Coptic decorations. See for instance the decoration on the sarcophagus with the peacock in the Heidelberg Museum (Fig. 6) and decorations on several Coptic textiles.

The more we look into the matter of the participation of Egyptian artists in the painting process, the more signs we see of it. For example the way the dancers are represented: the way they are dressed and the way they have sometimes one arm above their head: it is a Coptic way of representing a dance. The decoration on the robes of the different personages looks thoroughly Coptic, very different from the decoration on the dresses worn by dancers and other persons on Sasanian silverware. They are dressed in a different way wearing for example short little jackets and having a floating draperie around their legs and arms. Also when they are represented naked they look completely different in their pose: no arm stretched above their head and they wear no armlets around their upper arm (Fig. 7), like some of the women in the Qusayr ‘Amra paintings do and which appears to be a Coptic custom (Fig. 8). Finally, some of the ladies are clad in a cestus, a marriage belt. Originally it was the marriage belt of Aphrodite, worn by women who wished to make themselves desirable. The fifth-century Graeco-Egyptian poet Nonnos of Panopolis recounts in his epic poem The Dionysiaca a number of ladies wearing these belts. We see this kind of belt on a Coptic sculpture from Herakleopolis Magna dating from the 4th-5th century. It is worn here by a Nereid, sometimes mentioned as a daughter of the Nile.

This Nereid also shows the same kind of bracelets as the ‘Amra ladies are wearing.

The colors used in the representations such as pale browns and yellow were especially popular in Egypt. They are completely different from the colors in Sasanian paintings where red and blue are predominant. And finally the vine decoration in the two

20 Exhibition catalogue 1989, Thelma K. Thomas: An Introduction to the Sculpture of Late Roman and Early Byzantine Egypt, 54, 55. See also Van Lohuizen-Mulder 1995, 204.
21 There existed pattern books for Coptic artisans as a help in making textiles and book illustrations. See for example the Exhibition catalogue 1996, 268, no. 309. But why should these frescoes with rather complicated themes and representations be painted by local artisans using pattern books for the making of Coptic textiles, not even paintings, while the Coptic/Egyptian artisans themselves were available?
22 Mshatta as a matter of fact was nearby. And as we assume that Mshatta was built only a little later by the same caliph, Walid II, who built Qusayr ‘Amra and as it is said very often and very convincingly that Mshatta was partly built by Coptic artisans, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that Coptic/Egyptian artisans were already known to Walid II and were around when he made plans to build and decorate Qusayr ‘Amra. Such a foreign labor force is not coming out of the blue. And what counts for easy availability is that Copts were conquered by the Umayyads and were governed by them.
23 Christi entum am Nil, 1963, Kühnel, 231; Du Bourguet 1971, 170, 171, Fig. 63.
25 Exhibition catalogue 1989, 257, no. 171
alcoves behind the audience hall was a very common decoration in Ancient Egyptian and Coptic art. Especially the red heart-shaped leaves remind me of a decoration on a Coptic tunica with the same red leaf design.\footnote{See Exhibition catalogue 1996, 274, no. 34.}

And now follows the crucifixion in connection with the meaning of at least part of the frescoes. Could a Dionysian cycle be involved?

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE FRESCOES

The Dionysian cycle and the life style of al-Walid II

The myth of Dionysos is still very much alive at that time, having got a Christian interpretation. And as it also had an ancient Egyptian connection, this was the more so in Egypt.\footnote{The accession to power of an aristocratic Meccan family which had answered Muhammad’s call only after his success, was a grave blow to the Muslims of old standing; hence the hostility of their descendants towards the Umayyads, a hostility soon transformed into accusations – not always justified – of lukewarm faith or even disbelief”; Hitti 1970, 227: “most of our information about the lighter side of the caliph’s lives comes from Aghani, primarily a literary work, and similar books, which should not be taken too literally”; see also Oleg Grabar, 1996, 8; Brown 1971/1993, 189 says that not only he, but “the inhabitants of Mecca and Medina were far from being primitive Beduin”.

It is just unthinkable that the man with this gesture would only be a servant, as has been suggested.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 33.}

for, according to an ancient source, while hunting, he did not kill a captured gazelle, because her eyes reminded him of the eyes of his beloved.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 29.}

I think that I have found the portrait of the man with this kind of personality in the paintings of Qusayr ‘Amra (Fig. 9) next to the very tall lady, whom I see as Salma, as I will explain later (see Fig. 14). He is pointing at her.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 66.}

THE BOOK OF SONGS

The Book of Songs (Kitāb al-Aghānī) of Abu’l-Faraj al-Isfahānī from the tenth century describes him as such and stresses on a lot of follies which are ascribed to him.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 29.} Whether this is quite true is uncertain, as the book was written in the time of the Abbassides, the rivals and conquerors of the Umayyad Dynasty who around the year 750 murdered nearly the whole family. Only one escaped, the future governor of al-Andalus. They, the Abbassides might have used the opportunity of this book to depict Walid in a debased and unfair way. R. Hillenbrand and others call him the playboy of his time\footnote{Derenk 1974, 33.}, but I think that this is a too ‘low’ qualification. Certainly he was unorthodox, but he was after all a cultured man, not an uncivilized nouveau riche with a bad taste who all of a sudden stepped in from the desert. He came from a well-known family in Mecca.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 29.} He, very melancholic because of his, as it is said, true love for his sister-in-law Salma which stayed unanswered\footnote{Derenk 1974, 33.}, was a poet himself and a musician.\footnote{Derenk 1974, 66.} He must have been a very sensitive man.
is not the appropriate place for a male servant to be present.

He, Walid II, may have used the pre-Islamic Arab erotic poetry as an example in his own way, like later on the Sufis did, who used it in a symbolical and transcendental way. He was tolerant to other religions, especially to the Christian religion. It is known that he sometimes visited a Christian monastery in the neighbourhood and liked to chat with the monks, enjoy a drink with them and admire their gardens. He must have had a great interest in architecture, although this was not recognized and recorded by the historians.

The themes seen here, like the dancing, the music making connected with love scenes, belonging in this case obviously to a Dionysiac cycle, the hunting scenes, are not non-recurring representations in a Muslim setting, coming from a scandalous or even perverted mind, but they seem to fit into an ancient tradition of why and how to decorate a bathouse. The sixteenth-century al-Ghuzuli mentions in his Matali al-Budur (Rise of the Moons) decorations in a bathouse and their significance, for example scenes with lovers and hunters. They activate all the different aspects of our body and mind on an animal level, a physical level and a psychological level. The thirteenth-century philosopher Badr al-Din bin Muzaffar mentioned this theme already in his treatise Muffarrith al-Nafs (that which gives joy to the soul). He says that all medical doctors, wise and knowledgable persons, know that the sight of beautiful pictures gives joy to men, sends melancholical thoughts away and strengthens the heart qualities more than anything else, because seeing such pictures eliminates all unhappy and terrible influences.

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the same time the style of the painting has everything to do with the Arabic ideal of that time how to paint a woman. Richard Ettinghausen speaks of legs like columns of marble and alabaster, as explained in an Arabic treatise in the chapter on the beauty of women. There is another feature that we find in Coptic art several times, i.e. the way one of the Nymphs is portrayed as seen from the back. Compare how on the already mentioned hanging this is done in the same way. See how this is done on a Coptic relief of Leda and the Swan in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Fig. 11) and on some Coptic roundels in the Vatican Museum for instance.

Very often scholars hinted in connection with these frescoes at a Sasanian or Byzantine background. However, to my knowledge there are no Sasanian nudes represented in this way. Neither are such representations with an obvious Hellenistic background to be found in Constantinople.

Now coming to the dancers and the musicians, they definitely belong to the retinue of Dionysos. They represent his Maenads and flute players, like they are represented innumerable times on Coptic textiles (see Fig. 8). One may remark that some of the faces can be seen as Arabic faces and I should say why not. That does not contradict the thesis about the involvement of Coptic artisans. They painted faces they saw around them, just as Oleg Grabar is advocating the theory that the hunting scene for example with the onagers definitely shows a local scene with local animals. Moreover it might be very well possible that also local artisans were in some way involved in the making of the frescoes. Mosaics in Madaba from the same area for example, only dating a little earlier show that artisans from these surroundings were very well acquainted with mythological themes, among them the Dionysian theme (Fig. 12).

There is another example in Qusayr ‘Amra where Dionysos is shown this time with his wife Ariadne just left by her husband Theseus on the island of Naxos. A Coptic bone relief shows this scene in the same way: a nude Ariadne, Dionysos as a youth looking at her and a Cupid hovering in the air. And now I want to say something about the scene where a lady is sitting in a specific pose with a Victory bringing her a garland, a crown (Fig. 13). In my view this is the representation of Cassiopeia, said to be an Ethiopian Queen, Nonnos mentions in his Dionysiaca. In the legend of Dionysos, Cassiopeia is depicted in general as the loser in a beauty contest arranged by Dionysos. However, in some instances she is represented as the winner of the contest, like on mosaics in Palmyra and Apameia in Syria and in New Paphos on Cyprus, which was for a long time governed under Ptolemaic rule, where she is also represented naked to show her beauty. Alexandrian artisans could have been well aware of this variant of the Cassiopeia story in the Dionysiac cycle. Moreover her dignified posture, apart from her face which is thoroughly Arabic, looks like the posture of a matron on a painting in the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii. This Villa is decorated with frescoes with Dionysian scenes, obviously painted in an Alexandrian style.

Three other nude women were/are very prominently present in these mural paintings in Qusayr ‘Amra. There is the very tall lady next to a pool, rising like a Venus out of the water (Fig. 14). According to my view she is the representation of Ariadne in the figure of Walid’s beloved Salma. She looks like the nude Ariadne with the same kind of jewelry on a Coptic hanging in Switzerland, in the Abegg Stiftung at Riggisberg (Fig. 15). It is mentioned in one of the old documents, that one of the reasons that al-Walid fell in love with Salma was that she was very tall, taller than the friends around her. The two others originally placed in a symmetrical position and looking very much the same, of which one is now in Berlin, and are likewise tall, nude and impressive without any pornographic connotation to their nakedness. They are nude to show their exquisite almost dignified beauty, like Cassiopeia is showing her beauty in the beauty contest on the just mentioned mosaics in Syria and Cyprus emphasized by her nakedness. The two identical women wear a kind of hat which reminds me of a hat of one of the persons represented on a fresco, also painted in the same Alexandrian style, from the Villa of Publius Fannius Sinistor at Boscoreale, now in the Museo Nazionale. Their faces look like some of the Fayum portraits, they express the same grandeur.

Ettinghausen 1977, 32.
51 Exhibition catalogue: Treasures of Byzantine Art and Culture 1994, 55: the humorous detail of the swan biting Leda’s bottom seems to be an invention of the artist, and is in accord with other amusing touches on Coptic sculpture. See also Rutschowscaya 1990, 28, 29: ‘voile d’Antinoë’ in Paris, Musée du Louvre.
52 O. Grabar 1988, 81, 82.
54 Exhibition catalogue: Beyond the Pharaos 1989, 113. This is a furniture decoration.
56 Bowersock 1990, 50, 51.
57 Derenk 1974, 111.
58 In the Museum für Islamische Kunst. Musil 1907, XXIII and XVIII. See also Enderlein and Meinecke 1991, 143, pl. 6.
59 See Rea 1989, 60, 61; Moon 1992, 595: Pharao’s daughter in the Dura Europos Synagogue: ‘the frontal nudity must have had risqué connotations, but her prototype must be sought in local sculptures in the Graeco-roman tradition’. She looks like an oriental Aphrodite, like Ariadne on the hanging in the Abegg Stiftung.
These full length nude women differ from the female dancers and musicians, who are dressed. One would expect this just the other way round. But the ‘outfit’ and outlook of these nude ‘grandes dames’ fit into the theory of the Dionysian mythology: Ariadne, the wife of Dionysos, is represented like a goddess in all her nakedness. See for example the just mentioned Dionysos hanging in Switzerland.

There are some well-known ivories representing Dionysos and his circle: the ivories on the ambo of the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle (Fig. 16). They date probably from the Umayyad period. It is said by most scholars that they were made in Alexandria. This proves that at the time of Qusayr ‘Amra Dionysos was still very well-known. The ivory with a nude Dionysos was inlaid in the ambo given by Emperor Henry II to the Cathedral in Aix-la-Chapelle, where it still is, cherished as one of the great Christian treasures of the Cathedral!

The dome of ‘Amra with the signs of the Zodiac and the planets and the stars

The signs of the Zodiac and the planets stars in the dome of the second caldarium are typically not a local ad hoc invention. Egyptians reproduced celestial bodies as early as the fourteenth century B.C. in the tomb of Seti I. In Greek times and probably also in the Hellenistic period it was seen as auspicious to have the celestial bodies in a bathhouse. They seem to have had a kind of magic function to assure the good fortune of the lord of the mansion. It is known that theater players and dancers performed for al-Walid II a cosmic dance, wearing the costumes of the stars and planets. This shows that he was interested in astrology and astronomy and hence this decoration of the dome.

Representations in the tepidarium

Although the depiction of the boar playing a musical instrument or the dancing of a monkey in the diamond-shaped compartments, lozenges in the tepidarium are not really Egyptian representations, but more illustrations of the carnavalesk character of the festivals given by al-Walid II, according to the Book of Aghānī, the woman dancer who is also represented in one of the diamonds does show Coptic traits, by the way she is holding one arm above her head for example. Moreover, giving animals human traits and a human character and partly a human form, a specific activity and role fits into an ancient Egyptian concept and also into a Coptic iconography, albeit that the connotation is not so much purely human, but rather divine.

Heads represented in tondoes on the ceiling of this tepidarium show also Coptic characteristics (Figs. 17, 18). See among others the textile with the heads of Dionysian figures in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York or the heads on the fresco: the Maria Glorification in Bawit. It is said that the heads in Qusayr ‘Amra represent the different ages of man. Unfortunately the third head is no longer visible. The two remaining heads are very beautiful. One (Fig. 18) reminds me of the figure on the Coptic hanging now in Switzerland (Fig. 19). Who is he? He is too beautiful to be Silenus. Could he be one of the well-known initiates in the Dionysian mysteries? The other portrait is still more puzzling. It bears some resemblance to the sixth to seventh-century icon from the Monastery of St. Catherine which is said to have been possibly made in Egypt. There are two other enigmatic figures represented in Qusayr ‘Amra near the throne scene (Fig. 20). The heads resemble the other heads and they wear something that could be interpreted as a symbolical attribute, a flail, that the initiate is wearing on the just mentioned Coptic hanging. Representations of the allegories of Poetry, Philosophy and History with their inscriptions in Greek can also be explained by the Hellenistic background incorporated in Egyptian/Coptic art. See for example the Coptic fresco in al-Bagawat in Egypt.

The throne scene

In the throne room behind the audience hall, where the painting of the Six Kings is to be seen, we find,

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60 Klaus Wessel 1963, 124 is not of the same opinion. He dates the reliefs in the sixth century, because he sees Islam as an opponent to paganism. See further Stern 1963, 167, 168, 169. He pleads for a date in the Omeyyad period.
64 O. Grabar 1977, 232.
65 Enderlein 1990, 38: Walid II asked the poet Ashab to dress like a monkey.
67 In the above mentioned article by Du Bourguet is said (232): “le sujet de la danseuse évolue selon les caractéristiques copies”.
68 Doxiadis 1995, 90, 91, 92.
opposite the entrance, a person sitting on a throne, flanked by two figures. This throne scene gave many scholars the idea that this is a Byzantine representation. The model could only have been, according to their view, an emperor enthroned or the Cosmokrator as he is presented in Byzantine art, mainly because of the shape of the throne. But one forgets that it is again Alexandrian/Coptic artisans who used exactly this type of throne. See the statue of an enthroned emperor made of porphyry in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, which was found in Alexandria. It is likely that this statue actually was made in Egypt, as Egypt was the only country where porphyry was quarried. The emperor is sitting in the same posture as the figure on the ‘Amra throne with his legs next to each other. Also Holy Mary from the Monastery in Bawit sits in the same way on the same kind of inlaid wooden throne. The figures in Qusayr ‘Amra, standing at each side of the throne are obviously servants with fly whisks or flabella. In Byzantine art servants are never depicted on either side of the throne, as far as I know. It is true that in Sasanian art one finds the representation of the ruler flanked by two servants, but the Sasanian ruler is not sitting on a throne as is seen here, nor is the position of his legs the same. Servants with flabella serve a purpose in the East. They have not only a ceremonial function in these countries, but they actually have to keep the flies away. Coptic flabella are known. Later representations exist of enthroned Umayyad caliphs with servants with fly whisks. So this seems to have been a common feature in standard Umayyad enthronement scenes. However, the throne and the posture of the later caliphs are different. The representation of the so-called Pamplona casket (Fig. 21) is an example of this. That one of the figures in the throne scene in the ‘Amra fresco has a halo seems not to mean anything special here. In early Islamic miniatures at least, the round Christian-style halo does not necessarily indicate a certain sacred status.

The question arises: who is represented on the throne and why do we have a throne scene in a bathhouse? We may say that if there is an audience hall pertaining in my view also to art. See Brown 1971/1993, 189.


73 Buitelaar and Van Gelder 1996, 30, 31. The Queen of Sheba was maybe the queen of Yemen. Thus the title of the exhibition in the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris which was held till February 28, 1998 is Yémen, au pays de la reine de Saba. It is very well possible that the Umayyads (see note 4) came into contact with the legends around the Queen of Sheba in their conquered territory of Yemen. It is also interesting to point out that the Negus of Ethiopia (see again note 4) brought a sub-Coptic style of Christianity to the south of Yemen. This sub-Coptic style pertains in my view also to art. See Brown 1971/1993, 189.

74 Buitelaar and Van Gelder 1996, 29. As a matter of fact bathhouses were everywhere. See also Dow 1996, 32: “the Roman traditions of baths and bathhouse architecture were substantially modified during the course of the first few centuries of Islam”. Buitelaar and Van Gelder, 31.

75 Free and shortened translation of the story in Qisas al-Anbiya’ by Tha’labi, Beirut/Cairo, n.y., 285-286. See Buitelaar and Van Gelder, 29. 30.

76 Ginzsberg 1909/1988, 142: “When Solomon was of good cheer by reason of wine, he summoned the beasts of the field, the birds of the air...”; Sourdel-Thomine and Spuler 1973, 160.

77 They speak of a Nilotic scene that reminds them of such scenes on Coptic textiles and for the birds around the throne they provide a depilatory for her and that for the treatment with this depilatory she needed a bath or a bathhouse. So this was built.

The story tells that under the glass floor, where Solomon’s throne stood, there was water with fishes and that people and birds served him there.
Tha’labi wrote that at his command, the satans built him a court (sahh) of glass resembling white waters. Beneath the floor, they placed real water stocked with fish. Following that, Solomon had his magnificent throne placed along the central axis. This may explain why there was originally a painting of water with fishes and a Nilotic scene to be seen under the throne painting in Qusayr ‘Amra. This fragment is now in the Berlin Museum. That the throne is surrounded by a whole row of a kind of birds, which is otherwise a very unfamiliar feature in Byzantine throne scenes, may be explained by a passage in the Koran 27:16: Solomon said: we have been taught the tongue of birds... He marshalled his forces of jinn and men and birds. Tha’labi wrote: he then took his seat with the birds, jinn and humans arrayed around him.

Thus in my view the one who is actually sitting on the throne painted on the wall in Qusayr ‘Amra is King Solomon with the features of an Umayyad prince or future caliph. Unfortunately his face is no longer visible. Sauvaget and later on Jaussen and Savignac saw an inscription above the throne, which is completely faded now. According to them it said: “Allahumma bärık ‘ala hådhá ... ‘āfiyatu min Allah wa rahmatun”80, which means: “O Allah, bless it... security from Allah and mercy”. Inscriptions like this with the asking for blessings we find on other Islamic throne scenes dating from a later period of time. See for example a pýxis of al-Mughira with the text: “Blessings from God, goodwill, happiness and prosperity to al-Mughira, son of the Commander of the Faithful, may God’s mercy be upon him”.81

There was another inscription in Qusayr ‘Amra, mentioned above, read by Sauvaget, of which no trace remained. It said: “O God, bless the amir as you have blessed David and Abraham”.82 The mentioning of David (Dawud) and Abraham puzzled Oleg Grabar, causing him to say that this had a Christian flavor.83 That might be true, although at the same time it had a Muslim connotation, Abraham and David being mentioned both in the Koran and being very much revered by Muslims. There was in Islam a predilection for David as there was for Solomon as the prototype of the ideal ruler.84

There is a parallel here with an inscription on a ‘pagan’ mosaic in the Church of the Apostles at Madaba in Jordan from the sixth century, a personification of the Sea, Thalassa according to the inscription. She looks like the goddess Thetys, completely naked (Fig. 22). What is she doing in a Christian church, one might ask? According to the Greek inscription all around her image she is totally accepted in all her nakedness. It says: “O, God, who has created heaven and earth, give (long) life to Anastasios, Thomas, Theodoros and Salamanios, the mosaicist”. A kind of blessing is asked for the mosaic maker in the context of a totally profane image, like God’s blessing is asked in Qusayr ‘Amra in completely secular surroundings for the prince who built the little palace.

On the upper registers and the vault of the audience hall there are thirty-two panels depicting laborers occupied in building activities (Fig. 23). We found on a bone relief in the Princeton Museum of Art the representation of a carpenter (Fig. 24). It is said that it comes from Alexandria.85

Why are these men painted here? Representing the workmen, the laborers, the craftsmen of the building on the walls was not a common practice neither in that time, nor in an earlier period. There is another Islamic story about King Solomon, described in the Koran as a perfect man and a wise king. Solomon sitting on his throne invited artisans, laborers and builders to come to him and to help in the construction of the Temple.86 In the same way the Umayyad prince sitting on his princely throne gathered artisans and laborers and invited them to built this palace, giving them an important place in the building process. To show their importance he ordered to paint their images on the vault of the building. Maybe this is a very Islamic idea from the first period, not to ignore the laborers as pure slaves, but to give them their due in this way.

My idea about these paintings is partly in agreement with what is written by Fawzi Zayadine, especially in an article from 1986. The author sees the frescoes as having been made in a purely Hellenistic tradition, that was finely rooted in Syria and what is nowadays called Jordan.87 I agree with this in so far regard that Muslim rulers had for Solomon is apparent in the large array of frontispieces illustrating poetic texts and epics... In these works Solomon is seen sitting on his throne... animals, birds appear near to the king”.

81 Exhibition catalogue Al-Andalus 1992, 195.
82 Sauvaget 1939, 14.
87 Zayadine 1986, 426; Talbot Rice 1965/1993, 26 speaks of Hellenistic prototypes; Brown 1971/1989, 197 says in the con-
as I see Hellenism as one of the influences, although Hitti and Donner have a somewhat different opinion. They see Hellenism only as a very thin layer in these countries, but it is Glen Bowersock who opposes them. Zayadine refers back to Petra and the Nabataeans and mentions the contact with Hellenistic Egypt, especially Alexandria. The buildings in Petra are in his view made under the influence of Alexandria and I think indeed they were actually built by Alexandrians. In the so-called Painted House in al-Beidha, North of Petra, cut in a rock, the Siq al-Barid, there are first-century A.D. frescoes on the walls and the ceiling of a *biclínium*, or two-benched dining room with a tracery of vines and a variety of birds and a flute-playing Pan, which too bear a resemblance to Alexandrian art. Zayadine and others are also referring to paintings in graves in the North of Jordan, which also seem to have a Hellenistic background.

Thus, in Zayadine’s opinion, the paintings in Qusayr ‘Amra come from an old tradition, one could even say an Arab tradition, as the Nabataeans were Arabs. In recent years a wall painting with a very Hellenistic touch was discovered in Qaryat al-Faw in Saudi Arabia, in the center of the former kingdom of Kinda, dating from the third century A.D. It is a man’s face inscribed with the name of Zaki, an Arab name (Fig. 25). With the bunches of grapes around his head he definitely looks like the god Dionysos. He, a local notable, is apparently honored in this way. And that at a time when the goddesses Allat, al-‘Uzza and Manat were commemorated in an exclusively Arabian pantheon.

The problem, however, is that the architecture in Petra and the mural paintings are far earlier in date than the paintings in Qusayr ‘Amra. In the period between this art in Petra, the Jordanian graves and Qusayr ‘Amra nothing similar is found in the region. So who are the transmitters of this Hellenistic tradition to the Umayyads? It seems to me that they were the people from the same land who earlier brought the Hellenistic culture to these regions i.e. Christian Egyptians, Copts, Alexandrians. And as we know from *Papyri* that Copts have been working in Damascus at the Great Mosque for example and in Jerusalem, Coptic families could have been still around in these areas outside Egypt. We mentioned already that the decoration of the façade of the huge nearby palace Mshatta, which was probably built a little later than the little palace Qusayr ‘Amra also by al-Walid II, was partly made by Coptic artisans. The only difference is that in Damascus in my view it were mainly mosaicists, in Mshatta sculptors, in Jerusalem woodworkers and sculptors, instead of painters like in Qusayr ‘Amra. This implies that it was not the same category of craftsmen. But we know that all these different categories of artisans were available in Egypt at that time. There must have been a close contact between the Umayyads, being the successive patrons of buildings, and conquered Egypt as the deliverer of good artisans in every branch.

CONCLUSION

Concluding this article we may say that the frescoes are mainly made by Coptic artisans, who painted in a recognizable Egyptian/Coptic style. A Dionysiac iconography was partly used, the Dionysian cycle still being well-known in Coptic Egypt at that time, because the Dionysos myth was christianized. And this in origin non-christian theme lent itself easily to become an appropriate means for decorating an Islamic bathhouse, built by a wine-loving prince.
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**MAB VAN LOHUIZEN-MULDER**

**SINGEL 170 I**

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Fig. 1. Bathhouse, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 2a. Painting of a female dancer on the soffit of the East arch in the audience hall, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 2b. Detail of Fig. 2a.
Fig. 3. Lid of the coffin of Soter: vault of the sky and picture of the goddess Nut in Graeco-egyptian style surrounded by the zodiac signs, British Museum, London.

Fig. 4. Gaea. Floor fresco from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, National Museum, Damascus.
Fig. 5. Decoration on mitre-shaped arches framing several figures on the vault of the central aisle, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 6. Decoration on a sarcophagus with peacock. Ägyptologisch Institut der Universität, Heidelberg.
Fig. 7. Sasanian silverware. Detail: dancer, Ermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Fig. 8. Coptic textile. Detail: head of a dancer, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 9. Painting of a man. Walid II (?), Qusayr ‘Amra.
Fig. 10. Painting of a nymph. Detail of a scene with baby Dionysos in the caldarium, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 11. Relief panel of Leda and the Swan. Ashmolean Museum, Department of Antiquities, Oxford.
Fig. 12. Mosaic. Detail of dancers from a Dionysiac scene. Private house, Archeological Museum, Madaba.

Fig. 13. Painting of a semi nude lady with a Victory bringing her a garland on the N.W. spandrel of the audience hall, Qusayr ‘Amra.
Fig. 14. Painting of a nude lady bathing on the East wall of the right bay of the audience hall, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 15. Coptic textile. Detail of hanging, Abegg Stiftung at Riggisberg, Bern.
Fig. 16. Dionysos. Detail of ivory on an ambo, Cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle.
Fig. 17. Portrait in tondo in the tepidarium, Qusayr 'Amra.

Fig. 18. Portrait in tondo in the tepidarium, Qusayr 'Amra.
Fig. 19. Coptic textile. Detail of hanging, Abegg Stiftung at Riggisberg, Bern.

Fig. 20. Two personages in the small alcove, facing the entrance door, Qusayr ‘Amra.
Fig. 21. Ivory throne scene. Detail of the so-called Pamplona casket, Museo de Navarra, Pamplona.

Fig. 22. Mosaic. Medaillon with the personification of the Sea, Church of the Apostles, Madaba.
Fig. 23. Caissons with craftsman and camel. Detail of one of the painted tunnel-vaults of the left aisle of the audience hall, Qusayr ‘Amra.

Fig. 24. Ivory plaque with carpenter at work, The Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton.
Fig. 25. Painting of local benefactor in the guise of Dionysos, Qaryat al-Faw, Saudi Arabia.