DORIS BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF

THE LION-GAZELLE MOSAIC AT KHIRBAT AL-MAFJAR

The bath hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar, one of the most remarkable buildings dating from the Umayyad period, is well known to historians of Islamic art through the excavation and reconstruction of its layout by Robert Hamilton. Hamilton has subsequently added a new dimension to the interpretation of this building by publishing a biography of its probable founder, the caliph Walid II, and translating excerpts of the poetry composed by this fascinating and eccentric caliph. In his biography Hamilton not only further supports his earlier argument that the palace and bath of Khirbat al-Mafjar should be attributed to Walid ibn Yazid or Walid II (743-44), but he also gives life and meaning to the various elements of its architecture and decoration. Seen from this enhanced perspective, the bath hall seems to have been an appropriate stage for the extravagant life Walid II led, as described by his biographers, which eventually led to his assassination.

Stimulated by Hamilton’s interpretation of the bath complex, I was attracted particularly by the famous mosaic panel representing a lion attacking a gazelle underneath a tree. This panel is on the floor of the room,

Fig. 1. The general plan of Khirbat al-Mafjar. b: the bahw; m: the “music room”. (after Hamilton)
which, following Walid’s biographical sources, Hamilton calls a *bahu*, meaning reception hall, and which he identifies as a private room (fig. 1).

Walid II, the patron of Khirbat al-Mafjar, and the son of the caliph Yazid, is described in the sources as what one might today call a *playboy* (*khalif*). He was also an athlete and huntsman of great talent and an important poet who had a significant impact on the style of Arab poetry in the subsequent period, especially on the work of Abu Nuwas (died ca. 815). Poetry at that time was often sung, and Walid’s dedication to poetry was complemented by his passion and talent for music. He surrounded himself with poets, musicians, and dancers. Inspired by this aspect of his life Hamilton designated the vaulted hall that adjoins the bath proper as the “music room,” noting that there was an “unmistakable resonance between the defiant and often humorous eccentricity of Walid and peculiar features discernible in the buildings.”

The hall is reached from a projecting porch; sixteen pillars support the vaults of its roof. The porch was richly adorned with stucco floral motifs and representations of athletes, half-naked girls, gazelles, and sheep. A central niche was intended for a stucco statue of the caliph (most likely the caliph *in spe* at the time the bath was erected) standing above a pair of lions. On each of three sides of the hall three apses were once roofed by half-domes. These nine apses and two others flanking the porch entrance, making a total of eleven, complete the layout. The hall’s floor was composed of a patchwork of mosaic panels in a large variety of geometric patterns that rarely repeat. The central mosaic “carpet” that was once surmounted by the central dome is correspondingly circular. The complex was never completed; it was destroyed by an earthquake in 746 shortly after it was built. Only the mosaic pavement remains in its original condition.

Appended to the music room on the north were the bath and four rooms; on the south a few steps led down to a long plunge pool.

At the northwestern corner of the music room, adjacent to the structures of the steam bath, is the small absidal room or *bahu* (fig. 2). Its floor is covered by two mosaic panels — one rectangular with a geometric design, and the other an arched panel filling the slightly elevated floor of an apse. The arched panel has the representation of the lion attacking the gazelle (fig. 3). It is the only mosaic panel in the complex that has a figural motif, suggesting that this motif had a symbolic meaning of particular significance.

At the pictorial center of the mosaic is a large tree bearing fruit that look like apples. The foliage of the tree seems to grow on both sides from two vertical parallel trunks connected by a smaller branch. The viewer looking into the room can see the lion attacking a gazelle on his right side underneath the tree. On the left side two other gazelles are grazing.

Ettinghausen, in his article “The Conquering Lion,” saw the mosaic as a symbol of royalty. Later, in his “Throne and Banquet Hall,” he added a more political dimension to this interpretation, identifying the room as a “throne room” and the image itself as a representation of *dār al-islām*, the Muslim world, symbolized by the two grazing gazelles, in opposition to the *dār al-ḥarb*, the world outside the realm of Islam, symbolized by the attacking lion, basing this interpretation on an analogy with the Christian iconography of opposing good and evil. Such a political interpretation is, however, not consistent with the mosaic’s location in an almost hidden corner of the music room, adjacent to the bath rooms, i.e., in a place that was obviously a very private, even intimate, section of the palace complex. The symbol of Islam and the world seen by Ettinghausen would require

![Fig. 2. The *bahu*, restored perspective. (after Hamilton)](image-url)