

Christian Stucco Decoration in Southern Mesopotamia
and the Persian Gulf Region,
Sixth to Ninth Centuries



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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Trinity Term 2017

Abstract

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Christian archaeology and art of the region under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East in the Late Antique and early Islamic period is an underresearched field of studies, which exists in between more developed disciplines such as Byzantine and Syriac studies as well as Early Christian, Sasanian and Islamic archaeology and art history. However, archaeological excavations of the last century, especially in southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region, now allow research to be conducted on the most important medium of artistic expression of the region – stucco. Considered from the technological, stylistic and iconographic point of view and within the aforementioned cultural contexts, it reveals that the Christian stucco production of the region was shaped by Sasanian traditions and contemporary Byzantine and Islamic influences, but also that it developed an innovative and highly creative vocabulary of forms and motifs. It was especially among the Gulf communities of Sir Bani Yas, al-Qusur and other sites that this transformative approach towards traditional and contemporary artistic models manifested itself within a short period between the late seventh and the early ninth centuries. Slightly more conservative is the character of Christian art of southern Mesopotamia in the eighth and early ninth centuries. An interesting exception is a relief found at a church in Koke in the region of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in which the Sasanian technique of deep relief is combined with the Byzantine dress of the person represented. This fusion of culturally divergent elements testifies to the double identity of the Christians living under the Sasanians – and later, in the early Islamic caliphate – who were recognized as a part of society but distinctive for their religion.

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Acknowledgements

When I started my doctoral studies in Michaelmas Term 2013 I had great interest in the subject of Christian stuccoes in the region of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf but no first-hand experience in studying them and no access to the most important collections of these stuccoes. It is thanks to the generous help of many people and institutions that this project could have been conducted.

My deepest appreciation goes to Dr Julie Bonnéric, who kindly invited me to join the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka and enabled me to study the collection of stuccoes from al-Qusur in November 2015 and October 2016. I am indebted also to other colleagues from the mission who contributed to the writing of this thesis by facilitating many aspects of my research visits to the island, and special thanks go to Hélène David-Cuny for her wonderful photographs of al-Qusur stuccoes. I am also grateful to the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority for permission to study its collection of stuccoes and archival documents. Special thanks are due to Dr Mark Beech for his kind support, generous assistance, and helpful advice during my research visits to Abu Dhabi in September 2014 and December 2015.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the members of staff of the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford (especially Dr Mallica Kumbera Landrus), the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin (especially Dr Ute Franke), the Département des Antiquités Orientales of the Louvre, and the Middle East Department of the British Museum.

The British Institute of Persian Studies, the Thomas Whitcombe Greene Fund (the University of Oxford), and St Cross College (the University of Oxford) supported my fieldwork financially and I would like to thank them for that.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Dr Janet DeLaine and Dr Marlia Mango, for their support of my work and their most valuable advice and constructive criticism. To Dr

DeLaine I am especially grateful for tracing flaws to the logic of my argument and to Dr Mango for indicating the importance of northern Mesopotamian parallels.

I consider myself privileged that during my doctoral studies at Oxford I had an opportunity to present partial results of my DPhil research three times at the Late Antique and Byzantine Archaeology and Art Seminar and I am grateful to its conveners, Dr Marlia Mango, Dr Ine Jacobs and Dr Marek Jankowiak, as well as all those colleagues and friends who helped to shape my thinking by commenting, advising, and asking difficult questions.

Finally, especially warm thanks are due to my family. My parents supported and encouraged me unfailingly throughout the many years of my education. It is thanks to them that I could pursue my interests, passions and dreams. To my husband I am grateful for advising me on the graphic aspect of this thesis and for creating reconstructions and drawings for Chapter 3, but mostly for the many inspirational conversations starting with 'Do you think it makes sense if I write in my thesis (...)?' Staszek, it is to you that I dedicate the following pages.

Oxford, May 2017

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¹ Mission archéologique franco-koweïtienne de Failaka.

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Introduction

Christian art in the region under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East in the Late Antique and Early Islamic period has become the subject of growing attention among scholars. Archaeological reports, comparative works concerning Christian monuments, and texts discussing material evidence of the emergence of Christianity in particular regions have been published in recent decades. Although narrowly defined works were complemented by some more general publications, the 'big picture' of the problem is far from complete. The scholarly discourse tends to focus on academically – and often artificially – drawn boundaries between fields and subjects, leaving the Christian archaeology and art of the region in a non-defined space between Classical, Byzantine, Sasanian and early Islamic studies. At the same time, what emerges from the limited and isolated studies of the material culture of Christians in southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf is an image of coherent and distinctive artistic production, which certainly deserves better understanding and framing in an academic debate.

The primary aim of this thesis is thus to reconstruct the artistic landscape of Christian southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf during the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods by looking into the most important medium of artistic expression for Christian communities in this region, namely stucco. An equally important task is to situate the phenomenon of Christian stucco production in the wider world of the Late Antique and Early Islamic Middle East. Therefore, in the following chapters I will discuss different aspects of stucco production: the variety of forms and stylistic features, iconographic motifs and techniques; their relation to Classical and Sasanian artistic traditions as well as emerging Islamic art; the structure of the artistic environment with its centres, circulation of objects and exchange of artistic trends. I will finally attempt to contribute to the discussion on the chronology of Christian sites in the region. An important part of this thesis are two case studies of churches at sites of al-Qusur and Sir Bani Yas. The amount of stucco material from those sites as well as the availability of archaeological data from excavations allow us to reconstruct, at least partially, the original decorative programmes of those buildings. The results will contribute to the general discussion on

the Christian stucco production of the region but also will provide a unique opportunity to understand stuccoes in their original architectural context.

Stucco was unquestionably the most important material used in the art of the region. Its status was sanctioned by the tradition of stucco production reaching back to Parthian times and was the result of the relative unavailability of carving stone. Beside a few simple, bronze crosses and stone plaques, stucco decorations are thus virtually the only art objects or remains of architectural decoration known from churches in the region.

In this thesis by 'Christian stucco decoration' I understand stuccoes that either represent an unquestionably Christian motif – which is a cross – or were excavated in a clearly Christian context – that is, in a church. The term 'southern Mesopotamia' means the area south from ancient Seleucia-Ctesiphon and modern Baghdad, and 'the Gulf' – the islands and coasts of the Persian Gulf. The reason behind this geographical choice is twofold. Firstly, it is from this area within the vast region under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East that the overwhelming majority of Christian stuccoes comes. Secondly, close political and cultural relationships maintained between the Gulf and southern Mesopotamia – and especially between Christian communities in both areas – allow us to see the whole region in question as a single and coherent artistic environment. The chronological frames of this thesis are delineated by the occurrence of the material itself. The earliest example of stucco decoration in the region dates to the sixth century and by the mid-ninth century Christian stucco production in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf vanishes.

The starting point in my search for the better understanding of this artistic landscape is always an object – a piece of stucco decoration, its form and what it represents. My main methods are thus a formal and iconographic analysis. It is, however, within context, primarily archaeological, and secondly historical and cultural, that I further attempt to understand those objects.

There are two main definitions of stucco present in the academic literature, the material one and the functional one. According to the first definition, 'stucco' is lime-based and slow-setting material used in architecture for construction and decoration. It is different – because of its composition – from plaster, which is based on gypsum.² The second and prevailing definition of stucco is that it is a lime-based or gypsum-based material, which is used for decorative purposes. As such, stucco should be differentiated from plaster, which serves for covering walls and constructing floors.³ According to this understanding of the term, 'stucco' implies both the material, from which decorations are made and those decorations themselves.⁴ In this thesis, I follow the functional definition of stucco. The reasons for such a choice are practical. Firstly, without laboratory analyses it is often difficult to differentiate between lime-based and gypsum-based material. Secondly, the prevalence of lime or gypsum in the material changes its properties – such as durability – but it does not influence strongly the appearance of the decorations made of this material. As this thesis focuses on the artistic aspect of stuccoes, it is reasonable to follow the functional definition of the term 'stucco'. Thus, in the following chapters 'stucco' means an artificially produced, malleable material used for decorative purposes.

Transliteration

In most cases I follow full transliteration of Syriac, Middle Persian and Arabic names, unless they are commonly anglicized (for example Ctesiphon). The exception are names of sites from which stucco decorations discussed in this thesis come. In most scholarly publications they appear under their simplified names (although particular modes of transliteration differ greatly) and therefore – as well as for the sake of

² Bloom and Blair (2009), 235; this differentiation is followed by more specialized publications on stuccoes and in many more general texts are used interchangeably, as has been also noted by Bloom and Blair.

³ Weiner (2010), 185.

⁴ The terminological debate on the term 'stucco' is further complicated by language differences and local traditions of the use of this and similar terms. For an in-depth presentation of this debate see Gapper (1999).

readability – they are written in this thesis in their romanized version. Their full transliteration is given once, when the name appears in the text for the first time.

The catalogue

An important part of this thesis is the catalogue. In most cases the pictures included in the catalogue are not repeated in the main text and references to them are given in brackets.

Word count: 63632

1. History of Christianity in Mesopotamia and the Gulf region in the Sasanian and early Islamic period

Ecclesiastical structures of the Church of the East with its hierarchy of *metropoleis* and bishoprics acted as a binder for Christian communities in the vast region from northern Mesopotamia to Oman. Being a recognised church of the Persian realm it was also universal in the sense that it embraced Christians not only of the Sasanian state itself but also from the Arab clients of the Persian Empire and various tribes of Eastern Arabia, speakers of Syriac, Persian and Arabic. Modes of communication developed for maintaining ecclesiastical relations between particular regions and creating a coherent church structure served also in the process of spreading ideas and cultural achievements in the whole region under the control of the catholicos. A part of these ideas circulating among Christians in Iraq and Eastern Arabia must have been technological, iconographic and stylistic trends. For these reasons it is crucial for understanding the artistic production of the region to first discuss its ecclesiastical history.

In this chapter the history of Christianity in Persia, especially in its western part, will therefore be presented. The focus of attention will be on the fifth-century synods of the Church of the East, which played a crucial role in establishing ecclesiastical structures in the Sasanian Empire as well as on the later Sasanian and Islamic periods, which are most relevant to the time period covered by this thesis.

1.1. History of the Church of the East

The most important source for reconstructing history of the Church of the East are documents of the synods of this church known under the name of *Synodicon Orientale*. Translated from Syriac to French at the beginning of the 20th century by Jean Baptiste Chabot they provide invaluable insight into the theological stance of the church, its organization and relations with the Persian state.⁵ The second historical source of great importance is the *Chronicle of Seert*. Although it was written probably in the tenth century – and is therefore of a much later date than the events it describes – this Arabic text often cites historical sources of the seventh century, and possibly even earlier.⁶ For this reason it may be considered a reliable source. The *Chronicle of Seert* is a composition of histories about saints, catholicos, patriarchs, Persian kings, and Roman emperors as well as descriptions of cities and political events related to Christian communities in Persia and beyond in the years 251–423 and 483–650.⁷ A source that used to be considered especially valuable for reconstructing the early development of Christianity in Persia is the *Chronicle of Arbela*. This Syriac document was written most probably in the sixth century and presents the history of the Church in the province of Adiabene. However, the authenticity of the *Chronicle of Arbela* has been questioned and it is difficult to establish to what extent it can be trusted as a historical source.⁸ A source for reconstructing the history of monasticism in the western part of Persia is the *Book of Abbots* (or *Historia Monastica*) written in the mid-ninth century by Thomas of Marga. The focus of this text is on the history of the monastery of Bēṯ Abhe but also it provides information about the wider context of monastic life in Mesopotamia starting in the sixth century and continuing to events contemporary with the author.⁹ Most of the historical sources on Christianity in Persia tend to focus on the north-western part of the Sasanian realm. The exception are letters written by the catholicos ʾĪšōʿyāb III to the metropolitan of Fārs, bishops of Eastern Arabia and common people of this region. They are an

⁵ Chabot (1902).

⁶ Wood (2013), 3.

⁷ Scher (1908); Scher (1910); Scher (1911); Scher (1919); Wood (2013), 3.

⁸ Kawerau (1985); Tannous (2014).

⁹ Budge (1893); Brock (1976), 27.

invaluable source for the history of Gulf region in the post-conquest period.¹⁰ Letters of another catholicos, Timothy I, provide insight into relations between him, bishops of the church and Islamic rulers as well as on the expansion of the Church of the East to India and China.¹¹

Christianity emerged in Persia probably already in Parthian times. It spread from the territories of the Roman Empire and the key role in this process was played by the city of Edessa¹² located in upper Mesopotamia, close to the Roman-Persian border.¹³ What facilitated conversions of Persians to the new faith was the common language, Aramaic, which was being spoken by Christian communities emerging in Jewish settlements on both sides of the border.¹⁴ Beside this slow process of conversion, Christianity was brought to Persia also as an effect of more organized and violent actions, as first two Sasanian kings, Ardashir (r. 224–239) and Shapur I (r. 239–270), after their victories over the Roman army resettled Roman captives from Syria, Cilicia and Cappadocia – among them many Christians – to Mesopotamia.¹⁵ To about this time, ie the end of the third century, dates the famous inscription of the Zoroastrian priest Kratīr that mentions two religious communities in Persia: *kristiyan* and *nāčara*. Interpretation of these terms remains a subject of debate among scholars and the theory that seems to be most convincing has been proposed by Sebastian Brock. He has argued that the differentiation between these two groups of Christians was based on their origin. ‘Nazaraeans’ would thus be those believers indigenous to Persia and ‘Christians’ those who were resettled from Roman Syria.¹⁶

Sasanian wars with Rome not only brought to Persia a wave of Christian settlers but were also an indirect cause of persecutions against adherents of this faith. Christians were

¹⁰ Duval (1905), 179–204; see also new translation by Kozah (2015); Healey (2000).

¹¹ Young (1974), 128–155.

¹² Widengren (1984), 1–2.

¹³ Walker (2006), map 2.

¹⁴ Winkler (2003 b), 8; Widengren (1984), 4; for information on relation of Aramaic to Syriac see for example Brock (1997), 7.

¹⁵ Walker (2012), 998; Winkler (2003 b), 9.

¹⁶ Brock (1975), 91–93; Brock (2006); the scholar who has disagreed with Brock’s interpretation is Geo Widengren. He has doubted if the term *nāčara* designated Christians at all, Widengren (1984), 3.

perceived as potential supporters of the Roman Empire and therefore disloyal subjects of the Sasanian king of kings.¹⁷ The general pattern that emerged in the third century and continued to exist until the end of Sasanian rule was therefore that whenever the conflict between the empires intensified, Persian Christians fell out of favour with the Persian authorities.¹⁸ This association of Christians with Roman enemies was greatly strengthened when in 380 the Roman emperor Theodosius I announced Christianity as the state religion. The process of Christianization of the Roman Empire found its repercussions in the Sasanian realm as the first mass persecutions of Christians ordered by Shapur II started at about this time – first cases of violence towards Christians occurred in early 340. Persecutions intensified in the years 344–379 and because of their unprecedentedly violent nature they were called ‘the Great Slaughter’. Many bishops and priests of the Church of the East all over the empire were executed, among them three *catholikai*. Laymen were also affected as it had been ordered that all the Christians in the empire had to pay a double tax.¹⁹ Although also in the following centuries Christians of Persia suffered because of their faith, later actions directed against them never reached the level of organised persecutions such as these commanded by Shapur II. In the later Sasanian period probably the worst was the situation of Christian communities under the king Xosrau Anōšurvān (r. 531–579) who commanded the destruction of many monasteries.²⁰

Despite these periods of persecutions, Christians of the Sasanian Empire benefited from the fairly tolerant attitude of the Persian kings and were normally allowed to practice their faith and customs. Therefore in 410 – when Persian bishops gathered in Seleucia-Ctesiphon for a famous synod, which marked the formal constitution of the Church of the East in Persia²¹ – Christian communities had already been well established

¹⁷ Brock (1984), 8–9.

¹⁸ Brock (1984), 7; Widengren (1984), 25.

¹⁹ Widengren (1984), 26; Walker (2012), 1001.

²⁰ Widengren (1984), 27–30.

²¹ Chabot (1902), 253; by the formal establishment of the Church of the East in the Sasanian realm I understand the situation in which this church was acknowledged by the Sasanian authorities as a Christian church of the empire and legal steps were undertaken to create a coherent structure of this church, as opposed to the period before the 410 council when particular dioceses did not create a centralized ecclesiastical organization. See for example: Winkler (2003 b), 14–15.

in Mesopotamia and the Gulf region. At that time they enjoyed peace guaranteed by the Sasanian authorities.²² In many cities in the western part of the Empire churches were as common in urban space as other public buildings and in some of the Church provinces there were not just one, but two or more bishops.²³ The best evidence of the propitious conditions in which Christians continued to live in the Persian Empire in the early fifth century is the fact that the aforementioned synod was announced by the Persian king of kings Yazdgard I himself.²⁴

In his recent book Richard Payne has challenged the traditional opposition that scholarship had drawn between Christian and Zoroastrian inhabitants of the Sasanian realm. As he has demonstrated, Christian elites of the country perceived themselves as 'indigenous to the region'²⁵ as well participants and beneficiaries of Zoroastrian jurisprudence.²⁶ Furthermore, in Payne's view periodical persecutions of Christians do not testify to their exclusion from Sasanian society. It was rather that their implementation allowed Christian presence and involvement in the Sasanian public sphere and political life to be maintained:

The court selectively employed violence to set limits on Christian ambitions, preventing East Syrians from assaulting fire temples and from converting adherents of the Good Religion [Zoroastrianism, A.L.] to their own. These limits remained in place throughout the late Sasanian era, requiring periodic reinforcement when Christians attempted to transgress them. Norms communicated through violence – and its communal remembrance – allowed Christians to be included in imperial institutions without weakening the superior position of Zoroastrianism.²⁷

It seems, therefore, that the situation of Christians in the Sasanian Empire should be seen in terms of syncretic identity, which allowed one to identify oneself with the 'People of Book'²⁸ as well as with the Sasanian state.

²² Morony (1984), 332–333.

²³ Winkler (2003 b), 15.

²⁴ Chabot (1902), 253.

²⁵ Payne (2015), 138.

²⁶ Payne (2015), 105.

²⁷ Payne (2015), 200.

²⁸ Brock (1982), 12–18.

One of the aims of the aforementioned 410 council was to determine an administrative shape of the Church of the East and to create an ecclesiastical structure. Six ecclesiastical provinces were thus formally established at this synod (Fig. 1):

1. Bēṭh Arāmāye (Āsūristān) in southern Mesopotamia, with the see of a metropolitan (catholicos) in Seleucia-Ctesiphon/ Koke²⁹
2. Ḥedyab (Adiabene) in northern Iraq with metropolis in Arbela
3. Bēṭh Arbāyē (Arbāyistān), the westernmost province of the Church. Located in northern Mesopotamia, its metropolitan resided in Nisibis
4. Bēṭh Ḥūzāyē (Khūzistān), the easternmost province of the Church. Located in southwestern Iran, with metropolis in Bēṭh Lāpāt,
5. Bēṭh Garmay (Nōdardashīragān), a region between the Tigris and Little Khābūr river, bordered from the east by the Zagros mountains, with metropolis in Karkā ḡe Bēṭh Selōk (Kirkūk)
6. Maishān, southern Iraq, north from the coast of the Gulf. Its metropolitan resided in Pherāt ḡe Maišan³⁰

Interestingly, the division of the Church of the East into provinces as established at the synod followed an administrative structure of the Sasanian Empire.³¹ The geographical extent of the Church of the East was not limited, however, to the Sasanian Empire proper and its ecclesiastical structure encompassed also dependent and allied territories of the Empire: the realm in Iraq ruled by the Arab dynasty of the Naṣrids and the region of the Persian Gulf.³²

²⁹ Chabot (1902), 272; Buck (1996), 64–65; Walker (2006), 95–99, map 2; Wood (2013), xii; note that the list of metropolitan sees in the documents of the 410 synod mentions ‘see of Seleucia and Ctesiphon’ but the name of the province is not given. Certainly, however, what was later known as Bēṭh Arāmāye must have existed in some shape at the beginning of the fifth century as the documents mention also the bishop of Kaškar who served in the diocese of the catholicos as his right hand; Chabot (1902), 272.

³⁰ Chabot (1902), 272; Buck (1996), 63–65; Walker (2006), 95–102, ma 2; Wood (2013), xii.

³¹ Morony (1974), 117.

³² Christianity in the realm of the Nasrids and in the Persian Gulf will be discussed in more detail in section 1.2.

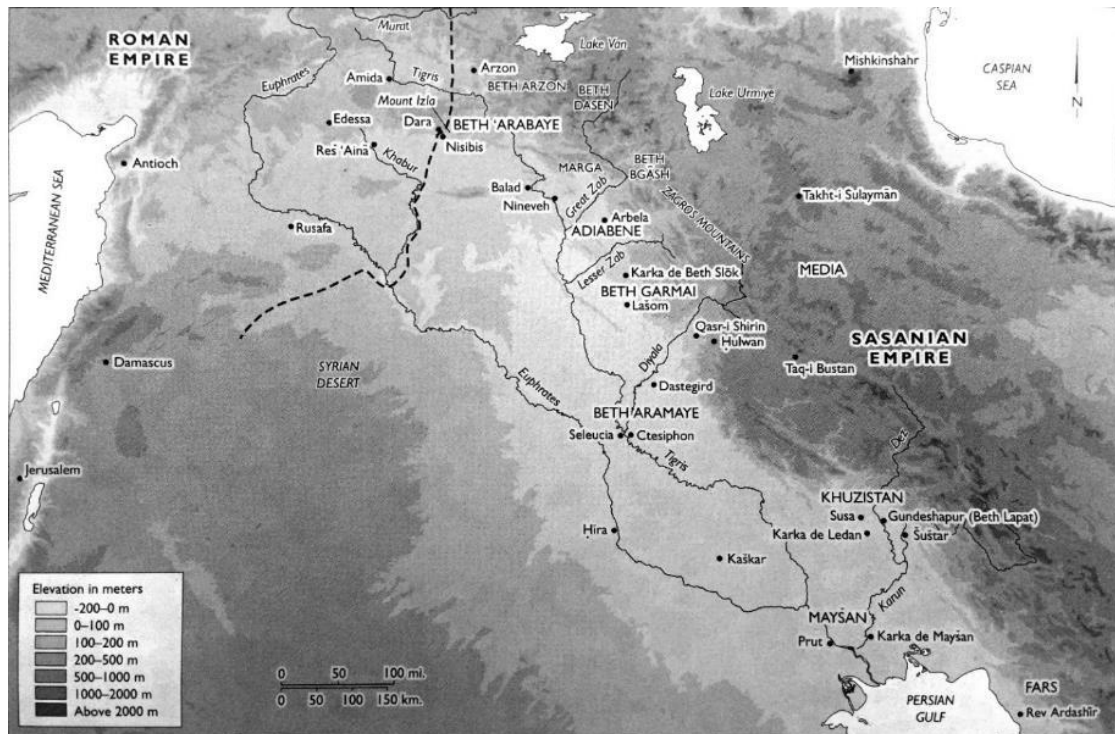


Fig. 1. Western provinces of the Church of the East

Beside discussing an administrative shape of the church, the participants of the council agreed also that in each town there would be just one bishop subordinated to his metropolitan and, through him, to the catholicos – the head of the Church of Persia. The latter had his residence in the town of Koke near the twin city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian realm.³³ Other issues such as celebrations of festivals and acknowledgement of one calendar were also discussed in order to create a unified ecclesiastical community.³⁴ The objective of all these decisions was to establish an autocephalous church that would embrace all the Christians in the Persian state.³⁵

This sense of autonomy of the Persian Christians did not interfere with the good relations the Church of the East had established with the church in the Roman Empire. Quite on the contrary; at the very first session of the 410 synod, a letter giving good, friendly advice on how to organize the church, sent by western bishops, was read and its content

³³ Chabot (1902), 258, 263, 266–267; Brock (2006), 74.

³⁴ Chabot (1902), 258–259; Brock (2006), 74; Walker (2012), 1002.

³⁵ Winkler (2003 b), 19.

was accepted by the bishops.³⁶ Also, at this time there were virtually no theological differences separating the two Christian communities. As acts of the council say:

canons which had been established in the West by the honored fathers, the bishops, might also be established in the East as an edifice of steadfastness and truth for all the people of God.³⁷

This was further confirmed 10 years later when the synod of 420 accepted decisions of the western councils of the fourth century (Ancyra, Neocaesarea in Cappadocia, Antioch, Gangra, and Pisidian Laodicea).³⁸ Close relations between the two churches did not, however, last long. In 424, at a synod organized in Markabtā, bishops of the Church of the East announced that although they appreciated support and help received from the 'Western fathers', they would no longer accept their authority.³⁹ A particular expression of this new attitude towards Roman bishops and of the Church of the East's sense of independence is a passage from the documents of the council that describes the catholicos as Peter of the church in the Sasanian realm.⁴⁰ The decision to loosen ties with the church of the Roman Empire was at least partially founded on the change of political climate in the Sasanian state. The authorities were no longer benevolent to Christians and, after years of peace, persecutions started again. In these circumstances, to stay in close relations with the clergy of the Roman Empire – the eternal enemy of Persia – would be dangerous for the Church of the East.⁴¹

Soon after the 424 synod the ecclesiastical landscape started to diversify due to a vehement discussion on the nature of Christ. Its centre became a famous theological school in Edessa – a city in the Roman Empire, close to the Persian border. In 437 Narsai, a Persian adherent of Dyophysitism, which was a theological trend stressing two natures of Christ, divine and human, became the head of this school. His understanding of the Dyophysite doctrine was condemned by the western Second Council of Ephesus in 449

³⁶ Walker (2012), 1002.

³⁷ Birnie (2014), 2.

³⁸ Brock (2006), 74–75.

³⁹ Chabot (1902), 293, 296; Brock (2006), 75.

⁴⁰ Walker (2006), 91; Chabot (1902), 294.

⁴¹ Winkler (2003 b), 19.

and the school in Edessa was closed in 489. In the meanwhile, Narsai escaped to the city of Nisibis in Persia and – with help of its bishop, Barsauma – he established a new theological school there. In the following centuries, the school became a main centre of theology in Persia with up to 800 students learning there.⁴²

The establishment of this school as the successor of the school of Edessa, which was condemned by the Roman authorities, became a turning point in East-West ecclesiastical relations. From this point onwards, the Christians of Persia started being perceived by the western church as Nestorians and heretics. Importantly, this reaction of the church in the Roman Empire was based on misunderstanding of the theological stance of the Church of the East rather than on what this Church was actually preaching. Theological foundations of the Church of the East were based on the teaching of Theodore of Mopsuestia, a bishop who represented the Antiochene school of theology. He acknowledged the existence in the one person (gr. *prosōpon*, syr. *parsōpa*) of Christ of two unified natures, divine and human, and two substances, hypostases (syr. *qenōma*, *qenōmē*).⁴³ This was in clear contrast to the preaching of Nestorius who argued that in Christ there are two persons and who therefore denied the unity of Christ.⁴⁴ This subtle but important difference between the theological views of Theodore and the preaching of Nestorius was not understood and acknowledged by the western church and therefore – up to the present day – the Church of the East has commonly been described as ‘Nestorian’.⁴⁵ This lack of understanding between the two Christological traditions was strengthened by linguistic difficulties, ie the impossibility of transmitting the exact meaning of theological terms in translation from Greek to Syriac and vice versa. For

⁴² Brock (2006), 162–163; Winkler (2003 b), 26.

⁴³ Morony (1984), 355–358; Brock (2006), 7; Winkler (2003 b), 22–23.

⁴⁴ Brock (2006), 164; for the sake of clarity I assume here that Nestorius’s theological views were actually Nestorian (ie that his theological views were identical with what started being described as ‘Nestorian’ after his death). This, however, has been a subject of an ongoing debate in scholarship; see for example Braaten (1963), 251–267.

⁴⁵ Winkler (2003 a), 4; Walker (2012), 995; for an exhaustive explanation of reasons for which the Church of the East should not be described as ‘Nestorian’ see Brock (2006), 1–14; see also Fisher and Wood (2015), 282–283.

example, such words as *hypostasis* and *qenōma*, although usually used interchangeably, have in fact slightly different meanings.⁴⁶

As is clear from this overview of theological discussion on Christology, at least in the first centuries of its existence the Church of the East followed the Dyophysite doctrine of Theodore of Mopsuestia and should not be described as Nestorian. This situation started to change, however, in reaction to the growing popularity of Miaphysitism in the sixth and seventh centuries and especially under an influential church father, Babai the Great (d. 628).⁴⁷ Miaphysite theology spoke not only about one *parsōpa* of Christ but also one hypostasis, *qenōmā* and one nature.⁴⁸ Michael Morony has described this crystallization and radicalization of the Dyophysite doctrine in the Church of the East as a response to the emergence of Miaphysite communities in Persia stressing that:

(...) the distinctive doctrinal position of the "Nestorian" Church developed in the early seventh century in reaction to the threat of a compromise with the Monophysites. Once established, this position provided a continuing basis for a separate "Nestorian" identity after the [Arab, AL.] conquest, and it tended to become more rigid because compromising tendencies continued to exist within the church.⁴⁹

The emergence of Miaphysite Christians in Persia not only contributed to the theological self-determination of the Church of the East but also threatened the position of the latter in the region east of the Byzantine Empire. Up to the seventh century the Church of the East was virtually the only Christian church in the Sasanian Empire. It was now a colossal organization, which comprised ten metropolitan sees and ninety-six bishoprics and reached as far east as China.⁵⁰ This monopoly of the Church of the East finished when the Miaphysite communities started to establish their structures in Iraq.⁵¹ Two

⁴⁶ Brock (2006), 3, 5–7.

⁴⁷ Brock (2006), 160; Morony (1984), 356–357; Wood (2013), 136–137; it seems to be an unsolvable problem whether this post-Babai theology of the Church of the East should be called 'Nestorian' or rather 'extreme Dyophysite' and it is in fact very difficult to draw a line between these terms.

⁴⁸ Morony (1984), 356.

⁴⁹ Morony (1984), 357.

⁵⁰ Buck (1996), 69.

⁵¹ Winkler (2003 b), 38–39; Morony (1984), 372–375.

Miaphysite centres in Persia were the monastery of Mār Mattai and the city of Takrit, both located in Iraq,⁵² and the first head of Miaphysite Christians in Persia was Ahudēmēh (559-75)⁵³. He was ordained by Jacob Baradeus, the bishop of the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) Church and a prominent figure after whose name this church is often called 'Jacobite'.⁵⁴ Despite this fact, the Miaphysite community in Persia at that time did not constitute an official part of the West Syrian Church. It was only in 629 that Persian Christians were incorporated into its structures and the metropolitan residing in Takrit, Marūtā, became officially recognised by the patriarch of Antioch as the head of Syrian Christians in Persia and gained a title of the 'Metropolitan of the East'.⁵⁵ At the same time Takrit became an official see of the metropolitan and the most important centre of the West Syrian Church east of Syria.⁵⁶ The emergence in Persian territories of Miaphysite ecclesiastical structures acknowledged officially by the patriarch of Antioch undoubtedly undermined the position of the Church of the East in this region. Still, however, Miaphysite Christians constituted a minority there.⁵⁷ They were perceived by the members of the Church of the East as strangers and competition. Hostile attitudes characterized, therefore, mutual relations between these two Christian sects throughout the late Sasanian and early Islamic period.⁵⁸

From 632 Persian territories were being conquered by the Arab army. In the same year the capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon fell and 30 years later, in 651, the last Sasanian king of kings was killed and his empire ceased to exist.⁵⁹ Almost 20 years of conquest and the sudden change of rule caused disruptions among Christian communities. Their situation improved, however, very soon after the Islamic reign had stabilized.⁶⁰ Morony has

⁵² Hage (1966), 22.

⁵³ Morony (1984), 374; Hage (1966), 23.

⁵⁴ Winkler (2003 b), 38.

⁵⁵ Morony (1984), 377; Hage (1966), 25-26; note that the title of 'maphrian' which is usually being associated with the Monophysite metropolitan in Persia was introduced only in the second part of the tenth century, Hage (1966), 27, note 214.

⁵⁶ Morony (1984), 377; Hage (1966), 25-26.

⁵⁷ Winkler (2003 b), 38-39; Morony (1984), 372; Toral-Niehoff (2014), 168-174.

⁵⁸ Morony (1974), 116; Morony (1984), 372-380.

⁵⁹ Morony (1986); Winkler (2003 b), 41.

⁶⁰ Morony (1984), 345.

explained the attitude of the Arab conquerors towards Christian subjects in Persian territories, stressing the lack of interest of Muslims in local Christian communities. Because of this ignorance Christians were by no means protected during the conquest and many of them, members of both the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church, were expelled from monasteries, converted by force or killed. But the same lack of interest gave Christians in the later period – when Islamic rule became firmly established in the region – a great degree of freedom. They could exist within their old-established structures⁶¹ and even expand. A good example of the improving situation of Christians in previously Sasanian territories is the fact that many new monasteries were built here shortly after the coming of Islam.⁶² The way the Arab rulers treated their subjects soon found its reflection in Christians' positive attitude towards Muslims. It was expressed explicitly by the catholicos ʿĪṣōʿyāb III (d. 659) who was convinced that the emergence of the Arab realm was due to God's will.⁶³ The change of rule brought also long-term benefits to the Church of the East. The end of the Sasanian Empire meant that the great war between the Byzantine Empire and Persia was now over and Persian Christians were no longer being involved in hostile relations between the two empires. In contrast to the previous Sasanian rulers, Muslims had no interest in Zoroastrian converts to Christianity and therefore Christians could now freely recruit new members of the Church of the East among Persians. Also no longer were Christian baptismal and burial customs problematic for the state authorities.⁶⁴ Especially good relations between the Church of the East and the Islamic rulers were established under the catholicos Timothy I (r. 780-823). A corpus of letters written by him gives a unique insight to the friendly relations he maintained with the caliph al-Mahdi⁶⁵ and the theological discussion between them.⁶⁶ In one of them he says:

We pray God, who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to preserve the crown of the kingdom and throne to the Commander of the Faithful for multitudinous days and numerous years!⁶⁷

⁶¹ Morony (1984), 381–382.

⁶² Baum (2003), 44.

⁶³ Brock (1984), 15.

⁶⁴ Morony (1984), 354; Walker (2012), 1015–1016.

⁶⁵ Young (1974), 128–139.

⁶⁶ Hoyland, 472–475.

⁶⁷ Young (1974), 134.

The relatively good situation of Christians under the new Islamic rule might have been also due to the certain resistance of Syriac speaking communities in Syria and Iraq to theological disputes, doctrinal divisions and formal boundaries between religious communities. It has been shown on a number of examples in historical sources by Jack Tannous that the religious reality of this region in the early Islamic period was one 'in flux'.⁶⁸ Members of one family would belong to different Christian denominations, the possession of church buildings and liturgical utensils would move from Chalcedonian to Miaphisite hands, and priests of one Christian community would baptize and offer Eucharist to members of a 'heretic' community.⁶⁹ Furthermore, it was not unusual for Christians in the region to lack basic knowledge of Christian faith, to consider themselves Christians and Jews at the same time, and to convert to Islam only to return to Christianity shortly later.⁷⁰ A similar phenomenon occurred among early converts to Islam. In Syria, they would often have very limited knowledge of their new religion, would continue practicing Christian rituals after conversion and venerating Christian saints.⁷¹ It might have been, therefore, that this opportunistic approach what was allowed both Christians and Muslims of the era to function in the reality of a fast changing political setting.

The change of a ruling dynasty from Umayyads to Abbasids in 750 brought further benefits to the Church of the East. From the second part of the eighth century onwards its spiritual centre, Koke, enjoyed – similarly as in the Sasanian times – the proximity of the capital of the Empire as the city of Baghdad was founded in 762.⁷²

Coming of Islamic rule brought also new opportunities in Eastern Arabia where increased trade through the Persian Gulf caused an influx of Christians and the establishment of

⁶⁸ Tannous (2010), 243; Tannous gives examples mostly from Syria but also from Mesopotamia and other regions of the Middle East. Even though it would be unjustified to apply all his observations to the region that is the subject of this thesis, there is no reason not to believe that certain attitudes towards religion were roughly similar in the whole of Syro-Palestine, Mesopotamia and the Gulf on the eve of Islam.

⁶⁹ Tannous (2010), 223–249.

⁷⁰ Tannous (2010), 381–452.

⁷¹ Tannous (2010), 452–477.

⁷² Baumer (2006), 148.

Nestorian communities there. The emergence of the Persian Gulf as an important region within the Church of the East was further strengthened by a conflict between the catholicos and the bishop of the province of Fārs, to whom the dioceses on the western coast of the Gulf were subordinated. As a result of this conflict, the province of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē emerged in the second part of the seventh century as independent from Fārs. Whether it was raised to metropolitan status by the catholicos ʾĪšōʿyāb III (r. 649-660) who wanted to punish the insubordinate bishop of Fārs or whether it declared its independence against the catholicos's will is not certain.⁷³ The importance of the region was confirmed a few years later, in the year 676, when a synod of the Church of the East was convened on an island of Dayrīn in the Gulf.⁷⁴

1.2. Christian sites in southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf region according to historical sources

It is crucial for interpreting the artistic production of Persian Christians to understand the wider historical and geographical context within which this production was taking place. In the previous section a brief history of Christianity in the Sasanian Empire has been presented. Geographical, political and cultural conditions of particular regions of Persia are, however, of such diversity that it is necessary to discuss in more detail these Christian cities and settlements that are especially important for the study of Christian stucco decorations in Mesopotamia and the Gulf region. In the following chapter, therefore, all the sites from which the stuccoes that are the subject of this thesis come from are listed. Their importance for the Church of the East as well as for the whole Persian realm is further discussed. The focus of attention will be on the later Sasanian period and on early Islamic times. The possible existence of Miaphysite communities at these sites is also mentioned. Next to the name of the sites, names of modern countries

⁷³ Carter (2008), 101; note that Brock (1999), 87 and Kozah (2014), 6–7 argue that the province of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē might have been formally established by the successor of ʾĪšōʿyāb III, Gīwargīs in order to re-establish good relationships with bishops of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē; it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a full overview on the question of rising independence and importance of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē in the seventh century and I refer here to primary sources and latest secondary literature. For older discussion see for example Beaucamp and Robin (1983).

⁷⁴ Chabot (1902), 482; Walker (2012), 1017.

in which particular sites are currently located, are given. All sites in question are marked on a map at the end of this chapter (Fig. 5).

Koke (Kōkē) and Tell Dahab (Tell Ḍahab), Iraq

A town in the region of the twin cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Empire. The area of Koke was very intensively urbanized from Hellenistic times and a number of settlements is known from both historical sources and excavations. The most popular name in the literature on the subject to designate the see of the catholicos is 'Seleucia-Ctesiphon'. Seleucia was a settlement erected in the Hellenistic period on the left bank of the Tigris and Ctesiphon was a Parthian city on the right bank of the same river. Sometime after the year 100 the course of the Tigris changed and the old settlement of Seleucia lost its immediate access to the river. It was abandoned in about 230–240 and at about the same time the new town of Koke, closer to the river and on the site of the ancient village of the same name, was established. The other name for this settlement is Veh-Ardashir or New Seleucia and the Arabic name for the twin city of Ctesiphon-Koke /Veh-Ardashir is al-Madā'in.⁷⁵ The twin city functioned as one urban structure thanks to a bridge that connected both its parts located at opposing sides of the river Tigris.⁷⁶ For the second time the course of the Tigris changed in the seventh century. This affected Ctesiphon and Koke /Veh-Ardashir and parts of both settlements were flooded (Fig. 2).⁷⁷

As has been already mentioned, in the academic debate the see of the catholicos of the Church of the East is referred to as 'Seleucia-Ctesiphon' and the name of Koke is sometimes associated with the cathedral church only (and not with the whole settlement). This seems to follow passages from documents of the synods of the Church

⁷⁵ It is important to differentiate between Veh-Ardashir and Ctesiphon as both of them are mentioned in acts of the 544 synod of Aba I. This was first noticed by Fiey: Chabot (1902), 328; Fiey (1967), 15.

⁷⁶ Hauser (2007b), 471, 475.

⁷⁷ The reconstruction of the urban changes in the region of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, as described here, was first presented by Fiey (1967), 3–18, 37; see also Cassis (2002), 63–64.

of the East which mention the patriarchal church of Koke erected in Seleucia.⁷⁸ That Koke did not designate the church building only and was associated with the name of a settlement is confirmed by a passage in the acts of the 410 synod, in which the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon is clearly differentiated from the see of Koke:

We made a strong appeal to the heads of the synod that once in two years, when the king is in Seleucia and Ctesiphon, and the great metropolitan who occupies the see of Koke writes to us, we will assemble gladly and will come for the veneration and honor of his fatherhood.⁷⁹

The modern misunderstanding around Koke and Seleucia is partially due to the confusing nomenclature in historical sources. As it has been already mentioned, Koke is referred to in those sources as Veh-Ardashir or New Seleucia. In fact, a shorter name of Seleucia is often used. Therefore, the name of Seleucia and Ctesiphon in the acts of the 410 synod would mean no more than 'Koke and Ctesiphon' or 'Veh-Ardashir and Ctesiphon'. In other words, contemporary Christians saw Koke as a part of the twin city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and the aforementioned passage simply states that when the king of kings resides in the twin city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the metropolitan calls for a synod in a part of the same city he resides in.⁸⁰ For these reasons, it seems to be historically accurate to use the name of Koke for the see of the catholicos.⁸¹

First of a number of synods organized in the town of Koke was held, according to Elias of Nisibis, a 11th-century historian, in 358. Although the account of Elias is of a much later date than the council, he refers to another historian, Socrates Scholasticus, and therefore his text seems to be a fairly reliable source.⁸² Koke was a residence of the catholicos up to the reign of Timotheos (780-823) who transferred it to Baghdad. Even after that time, however, it served as a spiritual capital of the Church of the East and all the catholicoi were still being consecrated there⁸³, the last one as late as 1318 (Timotheos

⁷⁸ Chabot (1902), 319, 460; Fiey (1967), 17.

⁷⁹ Birnie (2014), 6; Chabot (1902), 264–265.

⁸⁰ Hauser (2007b), 465–466, 475.

⁸¹ This has been accepted for example by Jens Kröger (2007), 137–139.

⁸² Delaporte (1910), 67; Fiey (1967), 18; Felix (1998).

⁸³ Baum (2003), 60.

II).⁸⁴ More than twenty catholicoi were also buried in the cathedral church in Koke.⁸⁵ The importance of the town is further supported by the fact that all the bishops of the Church of the East were obliged to pay, after an official consecration, a formal visit to the catholicos in Koke.⁸⁶

A church at Koke was excavated at this site by German archaeologists in years 1928–29⁸⁷ in the section of the town known as the mound of Qaṣr bint al-Qāḍī.⁸⁸ It was certainly not a cathedral but one of the minor churches of the town. Three arguments against interpreting the church as the cathedral of Koke have been given by Fiey: its small size, lack of inscriptions that would support this theory and lack of graves of the catholicoi.⁸⁹ This points into the assumption that Koke – with more than one church – must have been home to a sizable Christian community.

⁸⁴ Fiey (1967), 17.

⁸⁵ Fiey (1967), 18.

⁸⁶ Fiey (1993), 228.

⁸⁷ Reuther (1930), 1–38.

⁸⁸ Kröger (2007), 139.

⁸⁹ Fiey (1967), 18; for more detailed information on other churches in the Seleucia-Ctesiphon area known from historical sources see: Kröger (2007), 138.

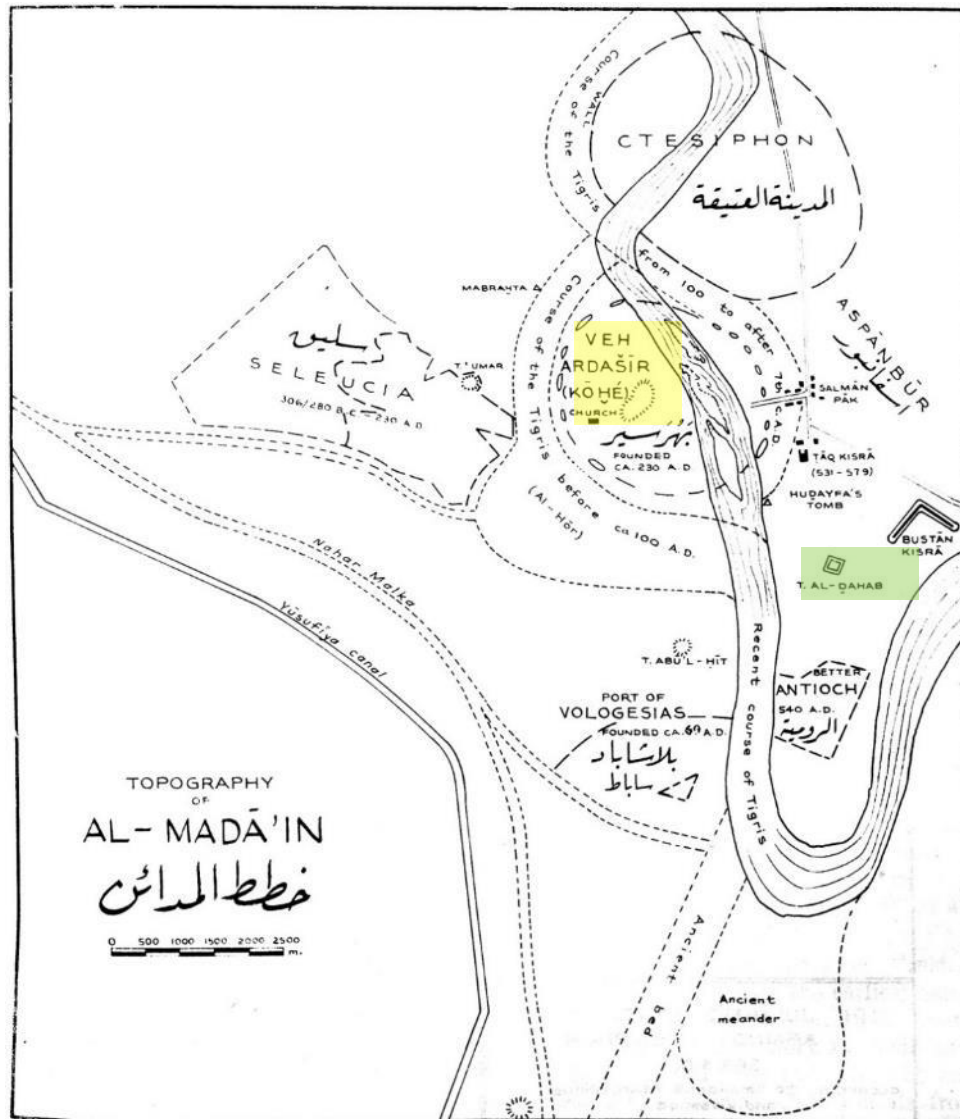


Fig. 2. The region of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Marked with yellow is Koke and with green is Tell Dahab

Associated with Koke was also the School of Seleucia – a Christian academy for theology, biblical and liturgical studies. Its existence is known since the second half of the fifth century up to the 11th century but its decline started already before the mid-ninth century. The location of the school premises is unknown but it was located in an old Zoroastrian fire temple.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Fiey (1967), 19–20.

Located at the same side of the Tigris as Ctesiphon and a few kilometres in a straight line from Koke was a hill known as Tell Dahab. It is 150 metres in diameter and surrounded by walls, within which a settlement was discovered. One of the houses excavated at the site belonged most probably to a Christian family.⁹¹

al-Hira (al-Ḥīra), Iraq

The city of al-Hira was the political and cultural centre of the "Persian Arabs"⁹² – the Arab allies of the Sasanian Empire who controlled a part of the borderland between the Roman Empire and Persia.⁹³ The identity of those people is a subject of discussion in the scholarship but they are usually referred to as the Lakhmids (Lakhm being the name of the tribe) or the Naṣrids (what denotes the lineage). However, it has been demonstrated that to use these terms is of little help for understanding the historical picture. Firstly, because we do not know what was the social structure of Arab tribes in the pre-Islamic period and secondly, because historical sources tend to focus on individuals rather than on the family dynasties.⁹⁴ It seems that for the Arabs of the era it was allegiance to a political or military leader that might have been more important than tribal affiliation or a reference to a common ancestor. What defines those people is thus primarily their alliance to a powerful state, in this case – the Persian Empire. Such a phenomenon was not isolated in the world of Late Antiquity as the neighbouring states of the Roman Empire and the Ḥimyarite Kingdom both secured their interest in the region by developing a patron-client relationship with the Arab allies. For the Sasanian Persia, the Roman Empire and Ḥimyar such relationships were crucial in achieving their

⁹¹ Kröger (2007), 145.

⁹² I use the term after Fisher and Wood (2016).

⁹³ Wood (2016), 786.

⁹⁴ Fisher (2011), 3–4; Fisher (2014), 290–294; Fisher and Wood (2016), 247–254; it is especially the term 'Lakhmids' that should be used with caution. While Naṣrids certainly did rule al-Hira, the tribal affiliation of their subjects is obscure, Fisher (2011), 65, 92.

military goals in the region and the Arab peoples involved in such alliances used the political game between those powerful players for their own benefit.⁹⁵

Relations of the Persian Arabs with the Sasanian state varied through centuries with the general tendency towards closer dependence, especially since the late sixth century.⁹⁶ These political relations with the Sasanian state had their reflection in the culture of the realm of the Persian Arabs and it was especially evident at court, which adopted Persian elements in hunting, fine cuisine and musical instruments.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it was a custom among the nobility from al-Hira to send their sons to Sasanian schools where they learnt Persian language and established personal bonds with Iranian citizens. As a result there emerged what Isabel Toral-Niehoff has called an 'Arab-Persian elite'.⁹⁸

Al-Hira was home to believers of many different religions, among them Christians of both Diophysite and Miaphysite persuasion.⁹⁹ While up to the end of the sixth century the Naṣrid rulers of the city were pagan, its elite – known as 'the 'Ibād' – was Christian.¹⁰⁰ The city was important for the Persian church and its metropolitans were among the attendees at all the synods of the fifth century, as well as of the 585 and 790 councils.¹⁰¹ Even more importantly, the famous synod of 424 was held in Markabtā ǧe Ṭāyyāye, most probably a settlement in close vicinity of al-Hira.¹⁰² The special status of the city is also attested by the fact that six catholicoi of the Church of the East were buried there.¹⁰³ In Richard Payne's opinion al-Hira's status as a burial site of catholicoi means that the city

⁹⁵ The Arab family dynasty allied with the Roman Empire was the Jafnids and the Arabs allied with Ḥimyar were known as the Ḥujrids, Fisher (2011), Fisher (2014), 290–294; Fisher and Wood (2016), 247–254; Hoyland (2014), 271–272.

⁹⁶ Toral-Niehoff (2013), 118–120; Toral-Niehoff (2014), 68.

⁹⁷ Toral-Niehoff (2014), 68–74.

⁹⁸ Toral-Niehoff (2013), 120–122.

⁹⁹ Hunter (2008), 42.

¹⁰⁰ Fisher and Wood (2015), 284; Wood (2016), 786–789.

¹⁰¹ Chabot (1902), 275, 285, 299, 390, 310, 315, 423, 607.

¹⁰² There is some disagreement on the identification of Markabtā ǧe Ṭāyyāye. Erica Hunter has been of an opinion that it is al-Hira itself. Toral-Niehoff has argued that while it may be that Markabtā was the same as al-Hira, it is also possible that it was some other Arab village or town close to al-Hira; Hunter (2008), 42; Toral-Niehoff (2014), 168, f. 73.

¹⁰³ Hunter (2008), 43;

was the second most important Christian settlement within the jurisdiction of the Church of the East.¹⁰⁴ The importance of Christianity for the city found its reflection also in a conversion of the last Naṣrid king of al-Hira, an-Nu‘mān III b. al-Mundhir (r. 580-602), to this faith.¹⁰⁵

Although the Miaphysite community was present in al-Hira in at least the first part of the sixth century¹⁰⁶, the first bishop of the city was appointed only in the early seventh century. Just a few years earlier, however, the leader of the Persian Arabs was baptised in the Church of the East and it seems that even if some kind of Syrian Orthodox ecclesiastical structure was present in the city, it could not compete in size and position with the Nestorian community.¹⁰⁷

Al-Hira remained an important Christian city in the early Islamic period. As Elizabeth Campbell has shown, there were sixteen monasteries in al-Hira and its outskirts in the early Islamic period according to accounts of Shābushtī, Yāqūt, and al-‘Umārī.¹⁰⁸

Islands of Kharg (Ḥārg), Iran; Failaka (Faīlakā), Kuwait; ‘Akkaz (‘Akkāz), Kuwait; Sir Bani Yas (Ṣīr Banī Yās), United Arab Emirates and the site of Jubail (Ġubail), Saudi Arabia

Beside a few decades from the late fifth century to the 20s/30s of the sixth century, when the tribes of the region were under control of the tribe of Kinda, Eastern Arabia remained, from the third century, dependent on the rulers of al-Hira. The Persian Arabs of the Naṣrid family acted there as agents of the Sasanian Empire protecting the interests of Ctesiphon in this region and keeping it within the sphere of influence of the Persian Empire.¹⁰⁹ As a consequence of these political dependences, al-Hira had also profound cultural influence on Eastern Arabia. This has been expressed by Irfan Shahid in the

¹⁰⁴ Payne (2015), 133.

¹⁰⁵ Toral-Niehoff (2014), 199–211.

¹⁰⁶ Morony (1984), 376; Wood (2016), 797.

¹⁰⁷ Morony (1984), 376.

¹⁰⁸ Campbell (2009), 271–301.

¹⁰⁹ Potts (1990), 247–250; Shahid (2012); see also Fisher (2011), 92–94.

words: 'For almost three centuries, al-Hira stood almost alone as a metropolis radiating higher forms of culture to the Arabs of the Peninsula.'¹¹⁰ Christians of al-Hira played also an important role in introducing Christianity into Eastern Arabia, a process that was completed probably by the end of the third century.¹¹¹

None of the islands in question is mentioned by the records of the synods of the Church of the East or by any other ecclesiastical documents. Quite a lot of information, however, is preserved about the whole region known as Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē. It comprised of the western coast of the Gulf north-west to Oman – Bēṭh Māzūnyē¹¹² –and the islands in the same, western part of the Gulf but its precise shape is difficult to determine. 'Bishops of distant lands – of Fars, the islands (...)'¹¹³ are mentioned in the acts of the council of 410 and similarly the existence of 'islands' is certified by the documents of the 420 synod.¹¹⁴ The only bishop known by name from this region from the synodal documents of the Church of the East is Paulos. He was appointed at the 410 synod as a bishop of two islands of the Gulf – Ardai (Darai) and Todorō.¹¹⁵ In the synodal documents of the sixth century bishops of Dayrīn¹¹⁶ and Mašmahīg are attested in the region of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē but their names remain unknown.¹¹⁷

It is difficult to establish whether in Eastern Arabia there were several dioceses, each with its own bishop, or there was one bishop superior over the whole Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē.¹¹⁸ In either case, up to the seventh century the region did not form a metropolis of the Church of the East and was subordinated to the metropolitan of Fārs with his see in Rēv Ardashir

¹¹⁰ Shahid (2012).

¹¹¹ Bin Seray (1996), 316–319.

¹¹² Bēṭh Māzūnyē was a diocese of the Church of the East, which most probably comprised of the Oman peninsula and, similarly as bishoprics of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē, was subordinated to the metropolitan of Rēv Ardašīr. The precise border between Bēṭh Māzūnyē and Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē is not known, Carter (2008), 101.

¹¹³ English translation by Birnie (2014); see also French translation, Chabot (1902), 273.

¹¹⁴ Chabot (1902), 276.

¹¹⁵ Chabot, 273.

¹¹⁶ Note that while Chabot has differentiated islands of Darai/Ardai and Deirin, Fiey has treated them as one island under a name of Dayrin; Chabot (1902), 273, 424, 48; Fiey (1993), 74.

¹¹⁷ Chabot (1902), 38; Fiey (1993), 74, 109.

¹¹⁸ This last interpretation has been suggested by Fiey (1993), 67. Robert Carter, however, has argued that Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē did not form a diocese and each bishop of the region was subordinated to the metropolitan of Rēv Ardašīr, Carter (2008), 101.

on the Persian coast of the Gulf.¹¹⁹ The metropolis of Fārs appears to have been quite an important province within the Church of the East. Its bishop is mentioned in the records of the 410 synod¹²⁰ and metropolitans of Rēv Ardashir attended all the synods between 424 and 585.¹²¹

Around year 647 a conflict between the catholicos Īšō'yāb III and bishops of the Gulf region began. At its very centre was the obligation that each ordained bishop should pay a formal visit to the catholicos residing in Koke. Bishops of the metropolis of Fārs refused to keep fulfilling this obligation and – consequently – announced their secession from the Church of the East. This situation affected also bishops of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē and apparently gave them a sense of autonomy.¹²² Therefore – even though the metropolitan of Fārs did finally re-unite with the catholicos – the bishops of the Arabian coast of the Gulf and the islands formed a new province of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē and did not come back under the jurisdiction of the metropolitan of Rēv Ardašīr.¹²³ The existence of this province in a later period is supported by the attendance of the metropolitan of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē at the 676 synod. The importance of this ecclesiastical province is further attested by the fact that this synod took place on one of the Gulf islands, Dayrīn.¹²⁴

Several attempts have been made to associate names of Christian sites from the Gulf region known from historical sources with Christian settlements known from excavations.¹²⁵ They have been, however, unsuccessful and none of the Christian sites

¹¹⁹ Fiey (1993), 67.

¹²⁰ Chabot (1902), 273.

¹²¹ Chabot (1902), 285, 300, 314, 322–323, 331, 3455, 351, 367, 422.

¹²² See letters XVII–XXI of the catholicos Īšō'yāb III, in which he refers to the insubordination of the bishops of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē, Duval (1905), 188–204; Kozah (2015), 45–69.

¹²³ Brock (1999), 87; Healey (2000), 228–229; Carter (2008), 101; Kozah (2014) 3–7.

¹²⁴ Chabot (1902), 482.

¹²⁵ These attempts are best summarized by Carter who has also presented a graphic comparison of archaeological sites with Christian remains and toponyms known from historical sources (see Figs 3–4): Carter (2008), 100–103, Figs 1–2.

with remains of stucco decorations can be securely related to the geographical names transmitted by historical documents (see Figs 3–4).

It is probable that Christians of Bēth Qaṭrāyē were in great part Persian speaking, although the language of the Church and liturgy was probably Syriac.¹²⁶

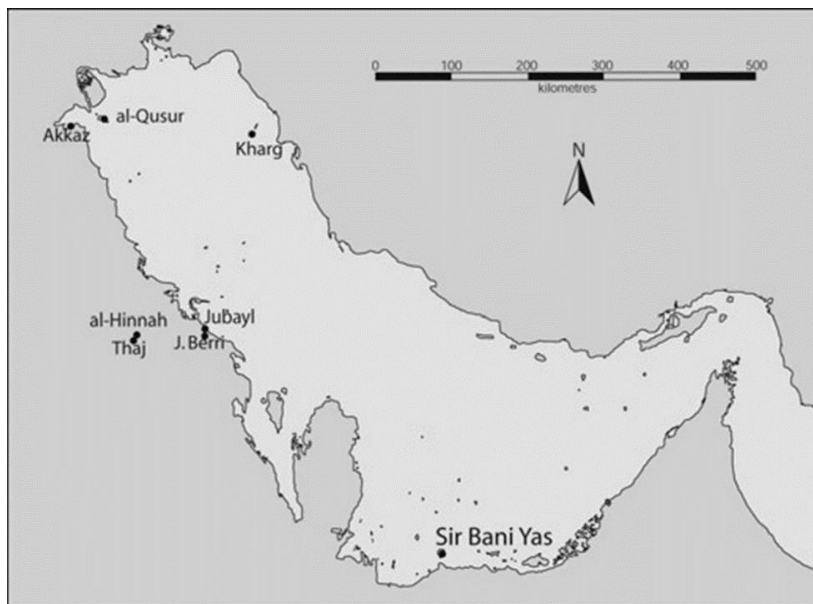


Fig. 3. Archaeological sites with Christian remains in the Gulf region

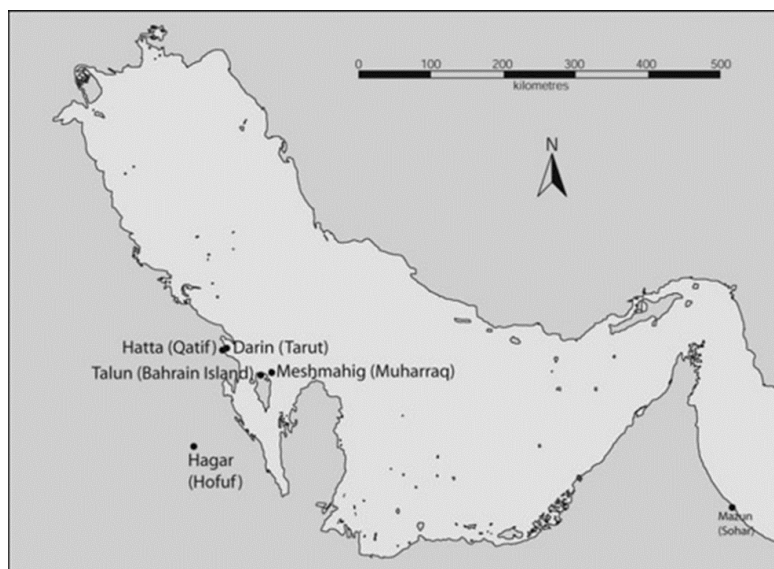


Fig. 4. Christian sites in the Gulf region known from historical sources

¹²⁶ Potts (1990), 240–241.

‘Ain Sha‘ia (‘Ayn Šay‘ah), Iraq

The settlement of ‘Ain Sha‘ia is located approximately 15 km north-west from al-Hira.¹²⁷ Toral-Niehoff describes this site as being under ‘unmittelbaren Einflussgebiet von al-Hira und in seinem zeitlichen Kontext’¹²⁸ Located so close to the base city of the Persian Arabs, ‘Ain Sha‘ia was most certainly under the influence of the same people who controlled al-Hira.¹²⁹

Tulul al-Ukhaidir (Tulul al-Uḥayḍir), Iraq

Located approximately 100 km north-west from al-Hira¹³⁰, west from the ancient site of Babylon.¹³¹ Qaṣr Banī Muqātil, a so-called desert castle, which has been identified with the site of Tulul al-Ukhaidir, is mentioned several times in historical sources.¹³² According to one of them, *Kitab al-Aḡani*, Qaṣr Banī Muqātil played an important role in the region and served as a meeting point for notables from al-Hira, among them an-Nu‘mān III.¹³³ Undoubtedly, therefore, Tulul al-Ukhaidir was located within the realm controlled by the Persian Arabs. After the Arab conquest Qaṣr Banī Muqātil remained an important residence until it was destroyed in 762.¹³⁴

¹²⁷ Okada (1989), Fig. 1; Toral-Niehoff (2014), 29.

¹²⁸ Toral-Niehoff (2014), 29.

¹²⁹ Morony has described the territory of ‘the Lakhmid Kingdom’ as extending normally west to the Euphrates river with its south border close to al-Hira. In the late sixth century this territory extended further south-east and reached Baḥrain, Morony (1984), 151; Genequand (2015), 213.

¹³⁰ Okada (1989), Fig. 1.

¹³¹ Talbert (2000), 91.

¹³² Northedge (2012); Finster and Schmidt (2004), 346–347.

¹³³ Finster and Schmidt (2004), 346–347.

¹³⁴ Finster and Schmidt (2004), 347.

Qusair (Quṣayr) (Iraq)

The site of Quṣayr was located seven kilometres north-west from Tulul al-Uḥayḍir.¹³⁵ Its political affiliation is difficult to establish but the proximity of al-Hira indicates that it could have been dependent on the same people who controlled the base city of the Persian Arabs.¹³⁶ According to Cornelia Horn and Erica Hunter the site belonged to the West Syriac church.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Toral-Niehoff (2014), 181–182; Finster and Schmidt (1976), 27; Talbert (2000), 91.

¹³⁶ Qusair has been described as belonging to the 'Naṣrid Realm' by Genequand (2015), 213.

¹³⁷ Horn, Hunter (2012), 1110.



Fig. 5. Sites in Mesopotamia and the Gulf from which Christian stucco decoration are known

1.3. Historical sources versus archaeological remains – the problem of discrepancy

The abovementioned problem of the lack of correspondence between Christian sites in the Gulf known from historical sources and those known from archaeological excavations exemplifies a wider phenomenon, which is the rapid emergence of Christian architecture in the post-Sasanian world in the seventh century and the lack of evidence of similar building activity for the earlier era. As has been already discussed, it is known from historical sources that in the preceding centuries Christian architecture must have flourished in the region. There is, however, no archaeological evidence for that.¹³⁸ Only partially can this situation be explained by the simple law of preservation of archaeological remains: the older the building or artefact, the smaller the chance that it will survive till the moment of discovery. It is in large part due to the dry climate that there are hundreds of architectural remains known from the region which date to much earlier periods. There must be, therefore, a historical explanation of this explosion of architectural activity of Christian communities that occurred concurrently with the emergence of Islam in the region.

Of great help in understanding this phenomenon is research conducted by Richard Payne. As he has demonstrated, the seventh century saw a rapid development of coenobitic institutions in the region. This was in stark contrast to the earlier period when monasticism would be associated rather with 'modest institutions within, or very near, population centres (...), which would be indistinguishable from other types of dwellings in the archaeological record.'¹³⁹ Payne has based his argument on a literary source, *History of Mar Agwen*, which— according to the scholar— dates to the late seventh-early eighth century and testifies to the emergence of coenobitic institutions a century

¹³⁸ With the exception of the church at Koke dated to the sixth century, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁹ Payne (2011), 98–99; Kennet has commented on the same phenomenon and supposed that the lack of pre-seventh century churches in the region maybe due to differences in building techniques, ie that those earlier buildings were constructed with less durable materials, Kennet (2007), 93. This argument has been followed by Carter who thought that churches of the earlier period might have been 'ephemeral buildings' and that some of the churches still await discovery, Carter (2008), 103.

earlier.¹⁴⁰ Three factors provided a foundation for this development. Firstly, the existence of monasteries in the Gulf was directly dependent on the flow of gifts and endowments from the laymen of the Church of the East. Therefore, it was the economic growth of the region in the post Sasanian period¹⁴¹ that founded coenobitic institutions such as the monastery described in the *History of Mar Agwen* or those known from Sir Bani Yas and Kharg.¹⁴² It seems that Christians largely benefited from this growth and certainly one of the commercial activities that brought wealth to their communities was pearl fishing.¹⁴³ Secondly, the seventh century was also the moment when the Gulf appears in ecclesiastical documents and monasteries are mentioned in letters of ʾĪšō ʿyāb III. As has been mentioned above, it was the striving for independence of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē that stood behind this sudden emergence in historical sources. While Payne has not commented on whether this independence was a result or the cause of the spread of coenobitic institutions¹⁴⁴, one may suppose that both the religious institutions and the region of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē benefited: the stronger the monasteries, the better the negotiation position of the province and the stronger and more independent the province, the better for monasteries. Thirdly, it was the good relationship with Muslim rulers, mentioned above, that facilitated this expansion of Christian communities in the Gulf in this period. The favour of the state authorities towards the Christians of the Gulf had been expressed in them approving the efforts of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē bishops to gain independence.¹⁴⁵

To what extent this can be applied also to southern Mesopotamia is difficult to determine. Certainly there was no case of a sudden attainment of independence that could result in a building boom. But it was also in this area — as well as in other post-Sasanian territories — that in the late sixth and seventh centuries coenobitism

¹⁴⁰ Payne (2011), 99–100.

¹⁴¹ In his 2007 article Kennet has claimed that the Sasanian period in the Gulf saw decline in economy and settlement. He has proved that by re-dating archaeological data into the post-Sasanian early Islamic period. It can be said therefore, that the Gulf was prosperous in the early Islamic period, in comparison to the Sasanian period, Kennet (2007).

¹⁴² Payne (2011), 105–108.

¹⁴³ Carter (2008), 104–105; Carter (2012), 23, 34.

¹⁴⁴ Payne (2011), 99.

¹⁴⁵ Brock (1999), 86.

became an established branch of monasticism.¹⁴⁶ One could argue, therefore, that at least some of churches known in southern Mesopotamia could have originally been coenobitic institutions, even if it would be difficult to prove such a hypothesis with archaeological evidence.

Conclusion

The traditional historiographic narrative, which represented Christians of the Church of the East as an oppressed minority maintaining their distinctive identity in opposition to the culture of the hostile Sasanians, has been challenged in recent scholarship. Without doubt there were episodes of violent actions directed by the Sasanians rulers against Christians and they might have undermined their loyalty to the local authorities. Certainly,

a self-identification as 'a Christian' must have been central to members of this Church and influenced their perception of the Sasanian Empire and of their position in relation to the state and to other Christians. But what shaped Eastern Syriac Christianity was also its deep attachment to the structures of the Sasanian Empire and its essentially Persian identity. Elements of this identity seem to have survived the fall of the Sasanians and the coming of Islamic rule. Political changes of the seventh century had an overall little impact on the Church of the East and it seems that its strategical choice was to submit themselves to the new rule. This attitude in combination with the fact that the new rulers were not interested in converting the local population to Islam made the coexistence of the ruling elite and the Christian communities peaceful. It may be even that the situation of the latter improved after the region fall into the Islamic Caliphate. In sum: throughout the period covered in this thesis the historical circumstances forced Christians to balance in between the need of expressing their religious identity and the necessity of maintaining proper relationships with the state. As we will see in the following chapters, it was the situation that promoted artistic syncretism and creativity.

¹⁴⁶ Payne (2011), 101.

The two regions under discussion in this thesis, southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf were, in the Late Antique and Early Islamic period, tightly interconnected politically, ecclesiastically and culturally. It was, again, those two factors, Christianity and a sense of attachment to the Persian world, that must have brought people from such distant and different regions as Seleucia-Ctesiphon and islands of Bēṭh Qaṭrāyē closer.

2. Artistic landscape of Christian southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf: iconography, styles, techniques

The aim of this chapter is to present iconographic motifs, stylistic features and techniques that characterize stuccoes across the region of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. Excluded from detailed considerations are fragments from the sites of Sir Bani Yas and al-Qusur, which will be discussed separately in Chapters 4 and 5, and the focus will be on stuccoes from all other sites. Further, the discussion of geographic distribution of those iconographic, stylistic and technological features will allow us to single out artistic regions within southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. The main body of the text is preceded by a short overview of all sites covered by this thesis, which gives basic information on architectural and archaeological context of stucco finds.

Because the number of preserved fragments does not allow any statistical analyses to be conducted, the chapter does not present a full typology but focuses on most representative and meaningful motifs and features. Furthermore, the partial state of preservation and the fact that many motifs are represented by one piece only makes it more reasonable to analyse selected motifs rather than to aim for a comprehensive but non-informative typology.

2.1. Architectural and archaeological context of stucco finds

Koke/Tell Dahab, Iraq

The stucco relief and other fragments of stucco decoration come from a single nave, vaulted church excavated at the site of Koke in the Seleucia-Ctesiphon area by the 'Deutschen Ktesiphon Expedition' under the direction of Oscar Reuther in the winter of 1928/29.¹⁴⁷ The barrel-vault of the church was supported by monumental pillars standing next to the longer walls of the nave.¹⁴⁸ Fragments of stucco decoration were found in the chancel of the tripartite sanctuary, under a floor dated to the Islamic period. The church was certainly the second structure of this function built in this location and the previous church was also a single nave building but with columns instead of pillars supporting the vault.¹⁴⁹

Another stucco decoration attributed to Christian inhabitants was found in the main room of a house at the site of Tell Dahab, located a few kilometres from Koke, by the same expedition during the 1931/32 campaign.¹⁵⁰

'Ain Sha'ia, Iraq

'Ain Sha'ia was a coenobitic settlement comprising a monastery establishment with a church and various other buildings. The site is located close to the so-called Dukakin caves which were occupied by anchorites¹⁵¹ and functioned as a part of the monastic

¹⁴⁷ Reuther (1930).

¹⁴⁸ Reuther (1929), 499–450. For the plan of the church see Fig. 132; the urban setting of the church has been described in more detail in Chapter 1.

¹⁴⁹ Reuther (1929), 499–450.

¹⁵⁰ Kröger (2007), 145.

¹⁵¹ Horn, Hunter (2012), 1109.

complex.¹⁵² Stuccoes were excavated at different parts of 'Ain Sha'ia: one of a group of non-residential buildings (site B), a structure of unidentified function (site C), and a monastery complex, which included a tripartite church with a sanctuary terminated with straight walls (site F).¹⁵³ At the last of those sites stucco plaques were found either inside the church or in direct proximity of this building. The site was excavated by the Japanese Archaeological Expedition to Iraq under the direction of Hideo Fuji in years 1986–1988.¹⁵⁴

al-Hira, Iraq

Stuccoes were found at four different locations within the large archaeological area of al-Hira: churches V and XI, the site of a prospective airport, and a bulldozer pit south of the Al-Najaf al-Ashraf Airport. The two churches were excavated in 1931 by an expedition of the University of Oxford under the direction of David Talbot Rice. The mission was formally a branch of the Field Museum-Oxford University expedition to Kish.¹⁵⁵ Both structures were oriented, tripartite and constructed with brick. They had no narthexes and their sanctuaries had straight eastern walls. Church XI had a bema surrounded by benches; the existence of a similar feature in the second church is not certain.¹⁵⁶

The brief report from those excavations only rarely allows us to assign particular fragments to one of the two churches. Beside the two churches the mission excavated also a number of residential buildings of al-Hira, some of them decorated with stucco of non-Christian iconography.¹⁵⁷ A large number of carved stucco plaques were found during three seasons of rescue excavations conducted in 2007 and 2009–2011 because of the plan of the construction of the Najaf airport. They revealed a number of buildings,

¹⁵² Hunter (1996), 73–74.

¹⁵³ Fuji et al. (1989); for the plan of the church see Fig. 105.

¹⁵⁴ Fuji et al. (1989).

¹⁵⁵ Talbot Rice (1932), 276.

¹⁵⁶ Horn, Hunter (2012), 1107, Table 58.1.

¹⁵⁷ Talbot Rice (1932); Talbot Rice (1934).

among them a large residential complex, possibly a monastery.¹⁵⁸ Two other plaques painted and with incised crosses were found in a bulldozer pit south from the airport during a survey conducted in 2015 by the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut under the direction of Martina Müller-Wiener.¹⁵⁹

Qusair, Iraq

Two stucco plaques come from a church site of Qusair North.¹⁶⁰ They have never been properly published and photographs of those stuccoes are mentioned only as comparative material in an article by Cassis.¹⁶¹ Two churches are known from the site of Qusair North, church A and church B, and it is difficult to determine from which of those buildings the stucco decorations come. Both buildings are single-aisle, elongated structures with a rectangular sanctuary.¹⁶² Church A was located within a walled compound, what may suggest that it originally formed a part of a monastery.¹⁶³ The site was excavated in 1979 by an Iraqi team but the results have never been published.¹⁶⁴

Tulul al-Ukhaidir, Iraq

Decorations carved in stucco were found in a desert castle of Tulul al-Ukhaidir known in historical sources as Qaṣr Banī Muqātil. The site was excavated by Barbara Finster and Jürgen Schmidt in 1973 and 1975.¹⁶⁵ The castle complex is a rectangular, fortified enclosure. In its western part there is a large reception hall surrounded by smaller

¹⁵⁸ Al-Ka'bi (2012), 3–6; Al-Ka'bi (2014), 90.

¹⁵⁹ Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (2015) and personal communication with Martina Müller-Wiener.

¹⁶⁰ Fuji et al. (1989), 58, 61.

¹⁶¹ Fuji et al. (1989), 61.

¹⁶² Finster and Schmidt (1976), 27–36.

¹⁶³ Horn, Hunter (2012), 1108.

¹⁶⁴ Fuji et al (1989), 33; Okada (1990), 110.

¹⁶⁵ Finster and Schmidt (2005), 340.

rooms.¹⁶⁶ The stucco plaque with a cross comes from one of those room adjoining on the hall from the east.¹⁶⁷ Another decoration with a cross, carved directly in wall plaster was found also in a room east of the hall.¹⁶⁸ Stuccoes of non-Christian character associated with the later phase of the building were found in other parts of the castle.¹⁶⁹

‘Akkaz, Kuwait

A fragment of stucco plaque was excavated at a tell site at ‘Akkaz. In the pre-oil era ‘Akkaz was an island but due to the transformation of the landscape of the bay of Kuwait it is now a part of the mainland. The church was excavated during the course of works conducted in 1993 by the French archaeological mission.¹⁷⁰ The remains of the church are poorly preserved and the full reconstruction of the plan is impossible but it seems that it was a relatively small, tripartite building with a tripartite eastern part.¹⁷¹ The stucco fragment was found in the eastern part of the church, by the doors leading most probably from the south aisle to the south room of the sanctuary.¹⁷²

Al-Qusur (al- Quṣūr), Failaka island, Kuwait

Stuccoes decorated the main church of the settlement, which was probably a monastery complex. A detailed description of the building and its surroundings is included in Chapter 4.

¹⁶⁶ Finster and Schmidt (2005) Fig. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Finster and Schmidt (2005), Fig. 7.

¹⁶⁸ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 88, pl. 75; it is difficult to determine whether both the plaque and the carved panel come from the same room but they were certainly located in the same part of the structure.

¹⁶⁹ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 83–87.

¹⁷⁰ Gachet-Bizollon and Dalongeville (2011).

¹⁷¹ Gachet-Bizollon (2011), Figs 1, 10; for the plan of the church see Fig. 106.

¹⁷² Gachet-Bizollon (2011), Figs 3, 10.

Kharg island, Iran

Stuccoes come from a large, tripartite, church situated within a monastery complex, which is the largest establishment of this kind known in the region. It comprises almost 30 monks' cells, a refectory, a library, and an infirmary.¹⁷³ The site was excavated in 1960 by the French Archaeological Mission to Iran under the direction of Roman Ghirshman.¹⁷⁴ Stuccoes representing crosses were found at different parts of the site: the church (the sanctuary, the narthex, both side aisles), monks' cells and other parts of the monastic complex.¹⁷⁵ Fragments decorated with vegetal and geometric motifs seem to have been found exclusively inside the church.¹⁷⁶

Jubail, Saudi Arabia

Stuccoes decorate standing walls of a small church comprising one, wide nave¹⁷⁷ and a tripartite eastern part. The church, discovered accidentally in 1986, has never been properly excavated or studied and it has been a subject of one brief publication¹⁷⁸ only. Its purpose is to communicate the existence of the church to the academic community. It offers a schematic plan of the building and some photographs but does not attempt to present any detailed description or results of any architectural studies. The church seems to have been a part of a larger architectural complex, probably a monastery, and is also possible that it was located within a larger settlement (a village or a town). At the moment, the site is located five–six kilometres from the coastline but it cannot be excluded that originally the settlement was a port.¹⁷⁹ However, until the site is properly excavated the urban setting of the church remains unclear. Stucco decoration of the

¹⁷³ Steve (2003), plan 11; for the plan of the church see Fig. 104.

¹⁷⁴ Ghirshman (1960), 10–14.

¹⁷⁵ Steve (2003), 115–120.

¹⁷⁶ Hardy-Guilbert (2003).

¹⁷⁷ It is possible that originally this part was divided into aisles but until the site is excavated it is difficult to determine that.

¹⁷⁸ Langfeldt (1994).

¹⁷⁹ Langfeldt (1994), 39–42.

church comprises two friezes decorated with vine scrolls, which are located above engaged columns in the sanctuary of the church and crosses imprinted in plaster walls close to doorways leading to the rooms located in the eastern part of the church and by the south entrance to the building.¹⁸⁰

Sir Bani Yas island, United Arab Emirates

Stuccoes decorated a relatively small church, which formed the focal point of a simple monastery complex. A detailed description of the building and its surroundings is included in Chapter 3.

2.2. Iconographic motifs in stucco decorations from southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf – a selective typology

2.2.1. Crosses

The cross was unquestionably the most important of all motifs in Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, and it occupies a central position in countless stucco plaques known from the region. Despite being a simple figure, which has immediately recognizable symbolic connotations, it presents a complex typology in the region. Described below are the most widespread types as well as two unique examples of creative transformations of the motif.

¹⁸⁰ Langfedt (1994), Figs 2, 4–9.

A cross decorated with roundels

Crosses of this type have noticeably splayed arms and the end of each arm is slightly curved and decorated with roundels. The motif is represented in incised stucco by plaques from al-Hira (cat. no. 36, Fig. 6) and 'Ain Sha'ia (cat. nos 15–16) and in moulded stucco by other plaques from al-Hira (cat. nos 44–45, 48), Qusair (cat. no. 4), 'Ain Sha'ia (cat. nos 8–10) and Kharg (cat. no. 114). Similar motifs are found in other media, for example in painted plaster pieces from al-Hira (Fig. 7), on which a red cross is decorated with blue roundels. Parallels are known from northern Mesopotamia, and examples are plaques from Bazyan in Iraqi Kurdistan (Fig. 8) and Tell Tuneinir (Figs 9–10) in north-eastern Syria.

A subcategory of this type comprises crosses with incised roundels composed of multiplied circles. There are three roundels at the end of each arm and the biggest of them is placed on the axis of this arm. Examples are crosses on stucco plaques from al-Hira (cat. no. 36, Fig. 6) and 'Ain Sha'ia (cat. nos 15–16). Very similar motifs are visible on a stone plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia¹⁸¹ and on stucco plaques from the northern Mesopotamian sites of Nineveh (Fig. 11) and Bazyan (Figs 8, 12) as well as stucco and limestone ones from Tell Tuneinir (Fig. 13) and other Syrian sites (Fig. 14).

¹⁸¹ Fuji et al. (1989), pl. 14 a.



Fig. 6. Incised plaque from al-Hira



Fig. 7. Plaster painted with a cross from al-Hira



Fig. 8. Stucco plaque from Bazyan



Fig. 9. Marble panel from Tell Tuneinir



Fig. 10. Limestone panel from Tell Tuneinir



Fig. 11. Fragment of stucco from Nineveh



Fig. 12. Stucco plaque from Bazyan



Fig. 13. Stucco plaque from Tell Tuneinir



Fig. 14. Limestone plaque from Syria,
National Museum in Damascus

A cross decorated with drop-like motifs

Similarly to the crosses decorated with roundels, a cross of this type has splayed arms. Each arm ends with a drop-like shape, which resembles reduced roundels of the previous type. The motif is attested from sites in Mesopotamia: al-Hira (cat. no. 42) and Tulul al-Ukhaidir (cat. no. 7), and from islands in the northern Gulf: 'Akkaz (cat. no. 50, Fig. 15), Kharg (cat. nos 89–90), Failaka (cat. nos 51–52).



Fig. 15. Stucco plaque from 'Akkaz

A cross on a stepped base

A cross standing on a stepped pedestal is visible on stucco panels and plaques from the Gulf islands of Failaka (cat. no. 52, Fig. 61), Kharg (cat. no 90, Fig. 16) and Sir Bani Yas¹⁸². The motif was also present in southern Mesopotamia, which is confirmed by a fragment of a plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia (cat. no. 18). Another fragment with a stepped motif is known from al-Hira (cat. no. 24) and it is fairly certain that originally they supported a cross.

Crosses standing on stepped bases, usually associated with Golgotha¹⁸³, were widely spread in Christian iconography of the Byzantine Empire in Late Antiquity. They appear, for example, on coins of many emperors of the seventh and eighth centuries minted in different parts of the Byzantine world: Constantinople, Ravenna, Rome, Naples and Sicily.¹⁸⁴ The closest comparison for the southern Mesopotamian stuccoes with this motif is a plaque from Bazyan in northern Mesopotamia (Fig. 17).

¹⁸² For the reconstruction of the plaque from Sir Bani Yas decorated with a cross standing on a stepped basis see Chapter 3 and Fig. 43.

¹⁸³ Grabar (1946), 275–277.

¹⁸⁴ Grierson (1982), plates 16–19, 28, 31–32, 35–36, 39–40.



Fig. 16. Stucco plaque from Kharg island

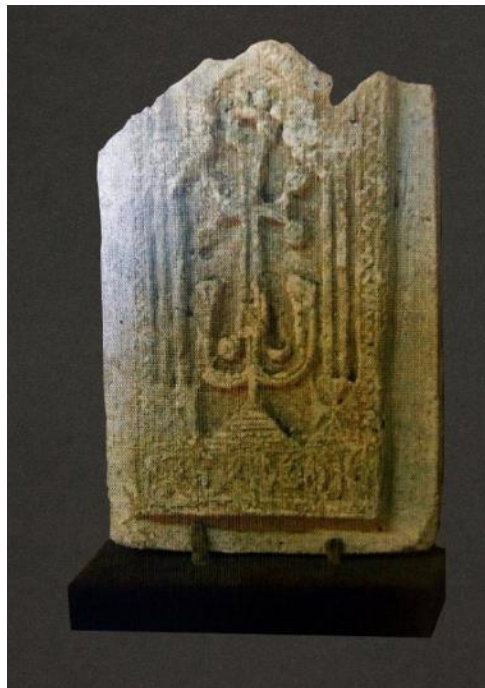


Fig. 17. Plaque from Bazyan

A foliated cross

In this type, the base of a cross is decorated with two leaves springing upwards at both its sides. One of the better examples of this motif is the reconstructed stucco plaque from Sir Bani Yas island.¹⁸⁵ Further examples of this motif are known from Mesopotamian sites of al-Hira (cat. no. 20, Fig. 18) and Qusair (cat. no. 4), and from Kharg (cat. no. 89). It must be noted, however, that the state of preservation of the plaque from Qusair does not allow other interpretations of the motif visible below the cross to be excluded. Similarly, the motif visible on the Kharg plaque is very peculiar and could be interpreted as wings rather than leaves.¹⁸⁶ On other plaques from Kharg (cat. nos 91, 112), which are described below in more detail, two leaves frame what is interpreted as a base of a cross but the overall composition is very complicated and does not follow the clear design of the 'foliated cross'.



Fig. 18. Stucco plaque from al-Hira

¹⁸⁵ For the reconstruction of this plaque see Chapter 3 and Fig. 43.

¹⁸⁶ See the next chapter.

A comparative example from outside the region is provided for example by the stucco panel from a church at Tell Tuneinir¹⁸⁷ and other late antique examples of foliated crosses in works of art from Syria indicate that the motif was popular in this region.¹⁸⁸

Atypical compositions

Two examples of cross compositions, one from Kharg island and one from Sir Bani Yasi island, clearly stand out and find no comparison in other stucco decorations from the region and beyond.

Two plaques from Kharg (cat. nos 91, 112, Fig. 19) show a cross with the upper part of the vertical beam and horizontal arms ended with fleurs-de-lis and the lower beam ended with two leaves. At the sides, the cross is decorated with other leaves springing from lines parallel to it and supported by two 'feet' located in lower corners of the plaque. In the upper part of the plaque leaves are accompanied by knobs. All this creates a square and somewhat confusing composition.

¹⁸⁷ Fuller and Fuller (2001).

¹⁸⁸ See for example: Peña (19967), 169; Fansa and Bollmann (2008), 165.



Fig. 19. Stucco tile from Kharg island

A number of fragments from Sir Bani Yas (cat. nos 122, 184, 201, 205) display also a complicated composition with a cross enclosed in a small circle and surrounded by fleurs-de-lis, palm trees and other crosses with arms of equal lengths.¹⁸⁹

2.2.2. Vine scrolls

A frieze decorated with a rigid, linearly executed vine scroll, the stems of which are tightly twisted around a floral or geometric motif is – after the cross – the second most popular motif used in Christian art of the region. Two different variants of a vine scroll frieze decorated the church on Sir Bani Yas island. In one of them (SBY type 1, cat. nos 149, 186)¹⁹⁰ alternating motifs of grapes and palm leaves are visible.¹⁹¹ Originally this decoration was extended by another frieze with stepped fields.¹⁹² In the second variant

¹⁸⁹ This type of decoration, classified as type 4, has been described in more detail in the chapter about the collection of stuccoes from Sir Bani Yas.

¹⁹⁰ Type 2 in the typology of Sir Bani Yas stuccoes, see Chapter 3.

¹⁹¹ It is often difficult to differentiate between palm leaves and palmettes. In this text leaves executed in a more naturalistic manner are called 'palm leaves' and those the shape of which is more regular and resembles fleur-de-lis motif is called a 'palmette'.

¹⁹² See Chapter 3.

(SBY type 2, cat. nos 185, 188)¹⁹³ the motifs enclosed by vine scrolls are crosses and palmettes and the border of the frieze is decorated with a string of pearls. Horizontal friezes with vine scrolls are known from Kharg island (cat. nos 92–93, Fig. 20) and Jubail (cat. nos 117–118). They are similar to one another in the way the palm leaves are represented with short, parallel lines. Originally at least some of vine scroll friezes from Kharg decorated with this motif were attached to other friezes decorated with stepped triangles.¹⁹⁴ This indicates a close affinity between decoration from this Iranian island and type 1 friezes from Sir Bani Yas.

Although the vine scroll decorating the frames of a large panel from Failaka island (cat. no. 52) represents the same general idea (tightly twisted sprouts, stylistic rigidity), there are also some major differences between it and the scrolls discussed above. In contrast to those from Kharg, Jubail and Sir Bani Yas, the scroll from Failaka is composed vertically. There is also no alteration of motifs and all the round spaces are filled with palmettes.



Fig. 20. Stucco frieze from Kharg island

¹⁹³ Type 1 in the typology of Sir Bani Yas stuccoes, see Chapter 3.

¹⁹⁴ This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.2.3. Arches

An arch decorated with a string of knobs or pearls

Fragments of arches decorated with pearls are known from al-Hira (cat. nos 27–28, 44–45, Fig. 21) and 'Ain Sha'ia (cat. no. 12), and visible on a stucco decoration from Tulul al-Ukhaidir (cat. no. 6, Fig. 23). It was often a common practice to combine this type of decoration with a zigzag motif, as is visible on plaques from 'Ain Sha'ia and Tulul al-Ukhaidir. An excellent comparative example is provided by a stucco plaque from Susa (Khuzestan, Iran), on which a human figure, probably a male saint, is visible under arches decorated with both pearls or knobs and zigzags (Fig. 22). Further examples of arches decorated with strings of knobs come from Umayyad stucco decorations at Khirbat al-Mafjar¹⁹⁵ and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi¹⁹⁶



Fig. 21. Stucco fragment from al-Hira

¹⁹⁵ Talgam (2004), Fig. 22.

¹⁹⁶ Talgam (2004), Figs 63, 66.



Fig. 22. Plaque from Susa

A horseshoe arch

The stucco fragment from 'Akkaz (cat. no. 50, Fig. 15) shows a small section of an arch, lower 'voussoirs' of which bend inwards creating what is known as a horseshoe arch.¹⁹⁷ A similar arch is also visible in the large panel from the located nearby site of al-Qusur (cat. no. 52).¹⁹⁸ A horseshoe arch is known from two stucco plaques from al-Hira (cat. nos 43–45), on which lower voussoirs are supported by massive, stepped imposts.

A close comparative example from outside the region is a plaque from Susa (Fig. 22), on which a human figure stands under an arch of this shape.

2.2.4. Herringbone, rhomboid, 'almond and diamond' and other geometric frames

In many stucco plaques the central motif, usually of a cross, is framed by borders decorated with a variety of geometric motifs. They take the form of either rows of triangles or rhomboids ('Akkaz, Kharg, al-Hira; cat. nos 50, 114, 37–38) or a herringbone pattern (cat. no 6, Fig. 16). Monumental decorations also include such motifs, and examples are the smaller panel from al-Qusur (cat. no. 51) and a fragment of a half-column from Koke decorated with deep-cut herringbone (cat. no. 2). Sometimes the decoration is more elaborate and includes diamond-like shapes and the so-called 'almond and diamond' motif. This is represented by both panels from al-Qusur, (cat. nos 51–52) a plaque from al-Hira (cat. no. 25), and the stucco decoration preserved in situ at Tulul al-Ukhaidir (cat. no. 6, Fig. 23).

¹⁹⁷ The fragment from 'Akkaz will be described in more detail below.

¹⁹⁸ See Figs 81–82 in Chapter 4.



Fig. 23. Carved stucco (a cross visible at the top of the composition)
from Tulul al-Ukhaidir

There are many comparative examples from the art of neighbouring regions and one of the most interesting ones is the aforementioned plaque from Susa (Fig. 22), where the outer frame and a decorative border around the saint's head are decorated with triangles. Other examples come from Tell Tuneinir (Figs 9–10) and Tulūl al-Haikal in the Central Tigris region¹⁹⁹ (Fig. 24) where both triangles and 'diamond and almond' motifs are represented.

¹⁹⁹ Sulaiman (2010), 129–130.



Fig. 24. Fragments of stucco plaques from Tulūl al-Haikal

MOTIF SITE	CROSSES					VINE SCROLLS	ARCHES		GEOME- TRIC FRAMES
	WITH ROUNDELS	WITH DROP-LIKE MOTIFS	ON A STEPPED BASE	FOLIATED	ATYPICAL		WITH A STRING OF KNOBS OR PEARLS	HORSE- SHOE	
KOKE									X
'AIN SHA'IA	X		X				X		
AL-HIRA	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
QUSAIR	X			X					
TULUL AL- UKHAIDIR		X					X		X
'AKKAZ		X						X	X
AL-QUSUR		X	X			X		X	X
KHARG ISLAND	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
JUBAIL						X			
SIR BANI YAS ISLAND			X	X	X	X			

Fig. 25. Iconographic motifs in stuccoes from Christian sites in southern Mesopotamia
and the Gulf

2.3. Techniques

The two main techniques of executing decorations in stucco known in Christian art of the region are carving and moulding. The first one was widely spread throughout both southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. The northernmost (and most impressive) example of the use of carved stucco is the relief from Koke and further examples are known from al-Hira, Tulul al-Ukhaidr, al-Qusur and 'Akkaz. It is possible that also some of the stuccoes from Kharg were carved.²⁰⁰

Moulding was certainly popular in the Gulf. The technique includes the use of moulds, in which an entire plaque or a tile is produced, as well as stamps, which are used for pressing a design into setting stucco material directly on walls of a building. There is an example of moulded palmettes from al-Qusur but it was especially Sir Bani Yas where the technique was in use and in fact all decorative fragments from this site were certainly moulded, at least at the first stage of production.²⁰¹ The cases of the Jubail and Kharg friezes are difficult to assess but it is probable that also at those two sites the decoration was moulded rather than carved. It is difficult to comment on the precise character of moulds used at particular sites but some comparative examples are available for the later period. The use of wooden and plaster moulds is confirmed for the Abbasid period in Samarra²⁰² and clay moulds were known to the Christian community living in the early Medieval period in the region of Samarkand (see Fig. 26).²⁰³ In some cases both techniques could have been mixed in one work of art, especially in the production of stucco plaques of standardized dimensions. The general shape of the plaque with its frame and a central motif (a cross) was thus given by

²⁰⁰ In this section I discuss examples where the technique is relatively easy to assess. In cases of poorly published decorations (for example from the site of Qusair) the technique is not certain (see the catalogue for details).

²⁰¹ The possible way of production of moulded friezes from Sir Bani Yas will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁰² Milwright (2001), 95.

²⁰³ Savchenko (2010), Fig. 5.

a mould but details were executed with a chisel. By using this technique the artist could produce large numbers of plaques in a limited time but also give them an individual look and adjust the decoration according to the expectations imposed by the patron.

Both carved and moulded stucco decorations were commonly used in the wider Iranian world outside the Christian context during the period in question (ie sixth to ninth centuries). The technique of moulding in stucco was especially popular in the Sasanian era. Stucco decorations of this period were either stamped directly on walls or prepared as tiles or plaques and later on applied on architectural surfaces.²⁰⁴ In the early Islamic context, the prevalent technique became carving directly on walls in setting material.²⁰⁵ This technological difference between the Sasanian and post-Sasanian period is, however, not without exception. Thus instances of carved Sasanian stuccoes as well as moulded decorations of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods can be pointed out.²⁰⁶

Another, less common technique of decorating Christian stucco plaques, was the use incised lines for creating an image. The effect was usually strengthened with colour, as the incisions are filled with paint. The technique is represented by a limited number of objects: plaques of 'Ain Sha'ia, al-Hira and a single example from al-Qusur. Roughly contemporary examples of incised and painted plaques come from the neighbouring regions of northern Mesopotamia (Nineveh, Fig. 11) and Syria (Fig. 14).

Stucco is produced by mixing gypsum or lime, or both those ingredients,²⁰⁷ with water and aggregate – usually sand. Properties of gypsum and lime based stucco are different: lime-based stucco takes longer to set but is more resistant to water and durable, while gypsum as the prevalent ingredient makes the material to set quicker.²⁰⁸ The use of a mixture of lime and gypsum for the production of stucco is not surprising from the

²⁰⁴ Debevoise (1941), 49; Arce (2001), 111; Kröger (2005).

²⁰⁵ Kröger (1978), 103; Kröger (1982), 209; Kröger (2005).

²⁰⁶ Arce (2001), 111.

²⁰⁷ Note that according to the wide definition of stucco – which is not followed in this thesis – 'stucco' may denote also material produced of clay and mud, Bloom and Blair (2009), 235.

²⁰⁸ Gapper (1999), 333–334; Milwright, 86.

technological point of view as both gypsum rock and limestone can be burnt in the same kiln.²⁰⁹

In the field of early Islamic art and architecture 'stucco' is identified with material produced of gypsum exclusively (Arab. *jiss*)²¹⁰, an approach that seems to follow Herzfeld's description of stucco used in Samarra as 'fairly pure plaster'.²¹¹ It should be noted, however, that there are virtually no laboratory studies on early Islamic stuccoes that could confirm that only gypsum-based stuccoes were produced in this period. An exception is an analysis conducted on Samarra stuccoes preserved at the V&A museum. It confirms that they are purely gypsum-based, with no addition of lime,²¹² but it is certainly not sufficient to formulate such a bold statement on the character of early Islamic stuccoes.

The lack of laboratory studies on the composition of decorative stuccoes is, in fact, a wider problem and very little is certain about the ingredients used for the production of stucco decorations in the pre-Islamic Middle East and beyond. Certainly gypsum based and mixed stuccoes were known in the Iranian world already in the Parthian period, as is confirmed by samples from Seleucia on the Tigris, which contain 74–91% of calcium sulphate²¹³ and pieces of stucco from a house at Uruk, which contain 50% of gypsum and 30% of lime.²¹⁴ The use of stucco containing a high proportion of gypsum was not limited to the pre-Sasanian era and a similar composition is known from a later period from Palmyra.²¹⁵ In contrast, Roman stuccoes of the post-Augustan era were usually lime-based.²¹⁶

If the traditional view on the gypsum composition of stuccoes in the Islamic era is true (even if not supported by laboratory evidence), then the abovementioned examples may

²⁰⁹ Wulff (1966), 126.

²¹⁰ Arce (2001), 108, 110; Arce (2007), 527; Hamilton (1953), 54; Bloom and Blair (2009), 235.

²¹¹ Herzfeld (1912), 15.

²¹² López Borges (2014); Rosser-Owen and Haddon (2014), 8.

²¹³ Debevois (1941), 47–48; gypsum is a mineral composed of calcium sulphate dihydrate.

²¹⁴ Simpson et al. (2012), 209–212.

²¹⁵ Dentzer-Feydy (1993), 150.

²¹⁶ Jewell (2011), 19.

indicate that there was a change in the production methods between the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods in that stuccoes of mixed composition were replaced by gypsum stuccoes. The turning point might have been the emergence of the 'Samarra horizon of stucco production'²¹⁷ as the non-Christian stuccoes from al-Hira preserved in the V&A museum in London are thought to be lime-based.²¹⁸

It seems also that two analyses conducted on Christian stuccoes from the Gulf may support the theory that the change of composition of decorative stuccoes in the region is correlated with the chronological change and the emergence of the Samarra 'school' of stucco production. According to an unpublished laboratory analysis of ten plaster samples from the monastery of Sir Bani Yas, stucco decorations from this site were gypsum-based (with calcium sulphate composing 50.3-75.7% of the material) but they contained also a substantial proportion of lime (24-31.9 %).²¹⁹ On the contrary, the SEM-EDS analysis of samples taken from al-Qusur plaster revealed that they are gypsum based and contain virtually no lime.²²⁰ Providing that the stuccoes of Sir Bani Yas date to the earlier period than stuccoes from al-Qusur²²¹, one could assume that this change in composition is in agreement with the general rule potentially applicable to the region:

²¹⁷ See Chapter 5.

²¹⁸ Rosser-Owen (2014), 8 and personal communication with Victor Hugo López Borges, the Senior Sculpture Conservator in the Victoria and Albert Museum; it should be noted that this observation has been based on a visual analysis of those pieces and not a material, laboratory analysis. One should, therefore, treat it with caution.

²¹⁹ Based on an unpublished report of tests conducted by Al Wimpey Roads & Construction, Laboratories Division in Abu Dhabi for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey dated to the 1st June 1996 courtesy of the Abu Dhabi TCA.

²²⁰ Tests were conducted at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology & History of Art by Christopher Doherty, to whom I am very grateful for his help. Tested with SEM-EDS were three samples of architectural plaster from the church A1 and from a nearby refectory. Samples of decorative stuccoes were not tested with the same technique but their analysis under an optical microscope showed that in composition they are very similar to samples of architectural plaster. The SEM-EDS analysis, as interpreted by Chris Doherty, revealed that the material is gypsum based and there is no significant lime content. The similarity between samples of architectural plaster and decorative stucco allow to argue that also the latter one was gypsum based. The result indicating virtual lack of lime in architectural plaster from al-Qusur was confirmed also by Dr Alf Lindroos from Åbo Akademi University who has prepared a sample of church A1 floor plaster to carbon dioxide. The carbon yield for the 46-75 micrometer grain size was 0.7%. Such a low result confirms that the architectural plaster was gypsum, not lime based. I am grateful for Dr Lindroos for conducting this test and his help with interpreting the result. Both tests were conducted as a part of research project of the French-Kuwaiti Archeological Mission in Failaka.

²²¹ See Chapter 5.

the earlier, the more lime in the composition of the material and the later, the closer the composition to purely gypsum stuccoes of Samarra. However – as demonstrated above – the number of laboratory studies is very limited and does not allow for anything more than speculation. It is for future studies to test if stuccoes from other Christian and non-Christian sites in the region reveal the same correlation between the composition and the date.

If there was indeed a change from mixed into gypsum-based stuccoes between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic period, then it would be necessary to explain why such a change occurred. A possible explanation would be that it was due to economic reasons, as the production of gypsum is less expensive than the production of lime.²²² It would be difficult to argue that the Christian communities of the region were less wealthy in the Islamic period than they were under the Sasanians and in the transitional period but certainly the era saw, especially in the Gulf, a Christian 'building boom'. It is possible, therefore, that cheaper stucco material was thought to be more suitable for decorating large architectural surfaces of recently constructed buildings. It is interesting in this context, that the biggest construction building enterprise of the early Islamic era, which was the foundation of Samarra, also involved decorating walls of buildings with gypsum stucco. It is true that the availability of gypsum rocks in the immediate surrounding of the city, mentioned above, must have been the primary reason behind such a choice of material. Nevertheless, the fact that the choice of gypsum stucco cut time and costs necessary for decorating countless walls, doorjambs and window frames could have also been of importance.

What could have also potentially influenced the composition of stuccoes with its local and chronological variations is the availability of gypsum and lime in the region. It seems, however, that whichever of those ingredients was more desirable at a particular site, it could have been transported relatively easily. Limestone is widely available in Iraq and on both the Arabian and the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf. Gypsum (in the form of anhydrite) is not as widespread but its deposits are present in large parts of what are

²²² DeLaine (1997), 86.

today Kuwait, eastern Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as sections of the Iranian coast of the Gulf.²²³ As Milwright has reported, it is also gypsum that is more accessible in the region of Samarra.²²⁴

Stucco is generally regarded as cheap material.²²⁵ However, in the Middle Eastern context – and especially in the Gulf – its production costs must have been greatly influenced by the lack of fuel for burning limestone and gypsum rock. For the later production of stuccoes in Samarra Milwright has argued that date palms could have been used for this purpose. Considering the extremely arid climate of ‘desert islands’ it might have been the same material – local but possibly also imported from the larger area – that was used by Christian communities in the process of stucco production.²²⁶

An important technological aspect is painting and gilding of stucco decorations, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 in reference to stuccoes of al-Qusur.

²²³ Konyuhov and Maleki (2006), Fig. 4; see also Wulff (1990), 126.

²²⁴ Milwright (2001), 86.

²²⁵ Grabar (1973), 194.

²²⁶ Milwright (2001), 103.

TECHNIQUE SITE	CARVING	MOULDING	INCISING	PAINTING
KOKE	X			X
'AIN SHA'IA			X	X
AL-HIRA	X		X	X
QUSAIR	?			
TULUL AL-UKHAIDIR	X			
'AKKAZ	X			
AL-QUSUR	X	X		?
KHARG ISLAND	?	?		
JUBAIL		?		
SIR BANI YAS ISLAND		X		?

Fig. 26. Techniques used in stuccoes from Christian sites in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. "X" – the technique was used at the site, "?" – the technique was probably used at the site.

2.4. Artistic regions

The difficulty in interpreting similarities among the stucco material from different sites is that only a limited number of pieces is preserved and even less is available for research. There is, therefore, a potential danger of extrapolating results of an analysis of several dozens of pieces to the whole artistic production in a vast region from northern Iraq to Oman in a way that would be more a theoretical concept than a reliable reconstruction. It seems, however, that in the case of at least some motifs the affinity between particular sites is clear enough to allow a partial reconstruction of relationships between them. On the basis of this observation, three artistic zones have been singled out:

2.4.1. Southern Mesopotamia

The region includes al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia, Tulul al-Ukhaidir, Qusair and Koke.

There are specific combinations of motifs and techniques which occur only in southern Mesopotamia, examples being crosses decorated with roundels composed of multiplied circles known from al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia, and an arch decorated with a string of pearls, which are known from al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia and Tulul al-Ukhaidir.

What many stuccoes from this region have in common is the technique of incision (al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia), and in fact the only other example decorated with incisions excavated on Failaka island may be also of Mesopotamian origin.²²⁷ Southern

²²⁷ This possibility will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Mesopotamia is also the only region covered in this thesis for which use of pigments on stuccoes is certain (al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia and Koke).²²⁸

Characteristic for Christian stuccoes of the region is their affinity with objects of art produced in the regions located to the northeast and in (or close) to the borderland between the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empire. It has been demonstrated that the most popular category of stucco objects from the region, ie relatively small stucco plaques representing a cross and decorated with incised or cut decoration, find close parallels to similar plaques from Syrian sites of Tell Tuneinir, Nineveh and Bazyan.

The stucco material from Koke is so distinctive compared to stuccoes from other sites in southern Mesopotamia that it is difficult to see it as belonging to the same region as the delicate plaques from al-Hira or Qusair. However, its geographical closeness to those sites together with the occurrence of certain features – the zigzag motif, use of paint and certain reliance on the art of the Byzantine empire – makes it justified to see all those sites as belonging to a single artistic region.

It is not surprising that al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia, located just 15 km one from another, emerge as particularly closely related artistic centres. What they have in common is the use of both incised and moulded plaques, the use of paint, and several iconographic motifs.

²²⁸ The possible exception may be a stucco panel from al-Qusur, which preserved what may be interpreted as paint. For discussion see Chapter 4.

2.4.2. The Gulf

The region includes: 'Akkaz, Failaka, Kharg, Jubail, Sir Bani Yas.

The motif which certainly is the most representative for the region, and is not attested in southern Mesopotamia, is the vine scroll. It is known for all the sites in the Gulf except 'Akkaz.

Very close similarities between friezes with this kind of decoration from Sir Bani Yas island, Kharg island and Jubail (the variant with bunches of grapes and palm leaves) suggest possible direct artistic contacts between those sites. The middle and southern sections of the Arabian coast could have been interconnected by pearl trade with the Persian side, especially with the port of Rēv Ardashir, which is located close to the island of Kharg.²²⁹ It would not be surprising to see artistic contacts making use of the trade route established between two sides of the Gulf. Beside being a port famous for the pearl market, Rēv Adashir was also the see of the metropolitan of Fars who – at least up to the seventh century – was the superior of Christians of the Arabian side of the Gulf. This dependency must have facilitated communication between Christian communities of Gulf islands and the Persian port. Even though in the later period these formally established relationships loosened²³⁰ due to changes in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, once established cultural contacts could have easily been maintained for much longer.

Compared to the aforementioned vine scroll decorations from other sites in the Gulf, the vine scroll of the al-Qusur panel is of a clearly distinct character. That there were artistic relations between Failaka island and communities of the southern Gulf is,

²²⁹ Carter (2012), 23.

²³⁰ On the ecclesiastical dependency of Arabian Christians on the metropolitan in Rēv Ardashir see Chapter 1.

however, testified by the plaque from Sir Bani Yas of a type that most probably served as a model for the same large stucco panel from al-Qusur.²³¹

Not surprisingly, the geographical closeness of 'Akkaz and Failaka resulted in certain similarities between stuccoes from those sites, which is clear in the use of a horseshoe arch, which is not known from any other site in the region.

2.4.3. The sub-region of al-Hira and northern part of the Gulf

The region includes: al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia, Qusair, Tulul al-Ukhaidir, 'Akkaz, Failaka, Kharg.

A considerable number of motifs, which are attested for sites in the al-Hira region and those located in the northern Gulf, allow for isolating a third region in the area where southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf overlap. An example is a cross decorated with roundels known from various sites in Iraq (al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia, Qusair) and also from Kharg island. Similar is the case of arms of a cross decorated with drop-shape knobs known from al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia and Tulul al-Ukhaidir as well as from all the islands in the northern part of the Gulf: Failaka, Kharg and 'Akkaz. Other characteristic motifs for this region are a ribbon or a band known from al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia and Failaka and a horseshoe arch known from al-Hira, al-Qusur and 'Akkaz, as well as zigzag-like patterns and a 'diamond and almond' motif (al-Hira, Tulul al-Ukhaidir, 'Akkaz, al-Qusur).

²³¹ See Chapter 4.

Conclusion

In both southern Mesopotamia and in the Gulf Christians have developed complex repertoires of motifs and forms and some of them are common to both those regions. But there is also a clear difference in stucco decoration between southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. In the first region, the unquestionable *leitmotif* composition was a centrally positioned cross – usually standing on a triangular or stepped basis – decorated with leaves, ribbons or wings and often framed with a rectangular or arch frame. Such a composition usually occupies a stucco plaque of a relatively small size. As has been already discussed, the occurrence of such a composition was not limited to the region in question and examples are known are known also from northern Mesopotamia and Syria. With the rapid spread of the Church of the East, the same scheme – executed not only in stucco but also in other materials – entered, in roughly the same period, Central Asia (Fig. 27)²³², T'ang China and Kerala²³³ and became a 'codified' – but also 'fossilized' – artistic emblem of Eastern Christianity. Certainly the popularity of this iconographic scheme over a vast region from the eastern frontiers of the Byzantine Empire up to Central and South Asia was due to its simplicity. It was easy to reproduce, straightforward to execute and – most importantly from the point of view of the newly established outposts of the Church of the East – it conveyed a clear, Christian message that could serve as a didactic tool for the clergy in their pursuit to explain the religion to the local communities.

The work of art that clearly stands out in the region of southern Mesopotamia is the Koke relief. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, it is a work of a highly creative artistic environment, which allowed for a unique combination of formal solutions rooted in divergent artistic traditions. The contrast with the repetitive character of stucco plaques with crosses may indicate a time difference. Indeed, other evidence indicate that the Koke relief is much earlier than other stuccoes from this

²³² Savchenko and Dickens (2009), 126–131, pl. 10; see also Savchenko (2007).

²³³ Okada (1990), 111.

region²³⁴ and therefore it was produced before the Christian art of the region started to 'solidify' and creativity was replaced by codified forms known in the whole realm of the Church of the East.

No such phenomenon can be observed in the Gulf. There are repetitive motifs – such as the vine scroll – but they do not prevail over other forms and do not occupy such a central position in the artistic vocabulary as cross plaques do in southern Mesopotamia. The character of stuccoes from those sites²³⁵ is determined by the creativity of an individual artist who designs in reference to the local tradition and patterns circulating in the area but independently of any stiff schemes and codified artistic formulae. What he creates is unique and finds no clear comparisons, and the best examples are the 'palm trees tiles' from Sir Bani Yas, the most peculiar crosses from Kharg, and the monumental panels from al-Qusur.

What is the reason behind this regional difference? It may be that the explanation is in the landscape setting. Even though the Church of the East spread over such a vast region, its distant dioceses usually maintained close ties with the headquarters in Mesopotamia. An excellent example comes from the monastery in the oasis at Turfan in western China, known mostly for a large collection of manuscripts that has been excavated. It is clear from this collection that the religious life of the Turfan community was in the liturgy, theology and scriptures practically indistinguishable from rites and literature established in Koke or Nisibis.²³⁶ If such a consistency was maintained over the large region between Mesopotamia and China, it is no surprise that Mesopotamia itself appears as a region of codified and repetitive artistic forms.

²³⁴ See Chapter 5.

²³⁵ This relates mostly to al-Qusur, Kharg and Sir Bani Yas and the scarcity of material from other sites prevents any conclusions being extended to them.

²³⁶ Erica Hunter's presentation 'The Church of the East at Turfan', Pembroke College, Oxford, 14/02/2017; Hunter and Coakley (2017).



Fig. 27. Ceramic mould from the site of Arbinjan-tepa near Samarkand

On the contrary, it seems that Christian communities in the Gulf – even if also interconnected with a network of ecclesiastical and trade links – were relatively remote and isolated. It is certainly thinkable that this sense of solitude – surely more symbolic than factual – triggered and legitimized their quest for new motifs and forms. It should be with caution that changes in political and ecclesiastical configurations of power are applied to art but it cannot be excluded that the Bēth Qaṭrāyē's pursuit of independence from the central institutions of the Church of the East also played a role. Certainly with ecclesiastical relations loosened between the region and the see of the patriarch, the separation from Mesopotamian patterns must have been easier.

3. Stucco decorative programme of the church on Sir Bani Yas island

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct the stucco decorative programme of the church on Sir Bani Yas island. This task is not, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, entirely accomplishable as stucco material from the site is preserved only partially and randomly and records of archaeological excavations conducted on the island lack some details. Regardless of these obstacles, the collection of stuccoes from the Christian site on Sir Bani Yas island is both in amount and in variety of types unique in the region of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf and allows a number of conclusions regarding the original decoration of the building to be drawn. What is even more important is the availability of archaeological data concerning the stucco finds at the site, which are archived by the Abu Dhabi Tourism & Culture Authority (Abu Dhabi TCA).²³⁷

The subject of this chapter is stucco. However, in order to understand how decoration executed in this material adorned the church, one has to reconstruct the original structure of the building. For this reason, certain aspects of the architecture of the church on Sir Bani Yas will also be raised.

The question, as it has been formulated here, will be answered primarily on the basis of preserved fragments of stucco decoration excavated on Sir Bani Yas, and of archaeological data, both published and unpublished, that were recorded by archaeologists working at the site for the last twenty-three years. Analysed and compiled, they will allow particular types of stucco decoration to be isolated and

²³⁷ I was able to study stucco material from the site of SBY 9 and archaeological documents concerning excavations (the catalogue of finds, unpublished plans etc.) in September 2014 and December 2015 in Abu Dhabi. This was thanks to permission granted by Ms Rita Aoun-Abdo, the Cultural Director of Abu Dhabi TCA. I am especially grateful to Dr Mark Beech, the Head of Coastal Heritage and Paleontology Section, Historic Environment Department, the Abu Dhabi TCA who provided access to stucco material and excavation documents from SBY 9, and to his colleagues from the Abu Dhabi TCA who helped me during my research visit to Abu Dhabi.

reconstructed but are largely insufficient when it comes to understanding how these different kinds of friezes and plaques functioned within the structure and space of the church. This is intensified by the fact that almost none of the churches in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf dated to the early Islamic period are preserved with standing walls and architectural decoration in place. The only exception is a church at Jubail in Saudi Arabia but only fragments of the interior stucco decoration of the east part of the building have been preserved.²³⁸ For this reason, a comparative analysis will be employed here as a complementary method and architectural decoration from the neighbouring region of northern Mesopotamia, and especially the area of Ṭur ‘Abdin, will serve as comparanda. There are several reasons why northern Mesopotamia seems to be a right choice for this purpose. Firstly, looking from the perspective of the Gulf, it is the closest region in which so many standing churches are known. Of equal importance is the fact that a great number of churches of the region of Ṭur ‘Abdin are dated to the roughly the same time as the southern Mesopotamian and Gulf churches, i.e. to the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.²³⁹ Secondly, historically, ecclesiastically and culturally these two Middle Eastern regions were in close contact. One of the examples of this closeness is the history of the theological schools of Edessa and Nisibis, cities located in northern Mesopotamia, which had profound influence on the Church of the East²⁴⁰, the same church which also shaped the history and culture of Christian communities of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. Moreover, parts of what can be called ‘northern Mesopotamia’ constituted the north-western province of the Church of the East – Bēṭh Arbāyē. Finally, it can be supposed that a certain attitude towards aesthetics was also common to northern Mesopotamia, both in those parts of the region that remained under the ecclesiastical superiority of the Church of the East and in those belonging to the West Syriac Church, and for southern regions. This is suggested by the fact that decorations of churches in northern Mesopotamia, just as of those in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, were mainly aniconic.²⁴¹ Although isolated cases of figural

²³⁸ Langfeldt (1994), 34–39.

²³⁹ Bell and Mango (1982), vi–vii.

²⁴⁰ Brock (2006), 162–163; Winkler (2003 b), 26; see Chapter 1.

²⁴¹ Mundell (1977), 72; Keser-Kayaalp (2009) 189.

representations are known from those regions²⁴², sites where a decorative programme of a church is either limited to non-figural representations, or these representations comprise the very core of decorative schemes, prevail. Examples from northern Mesopotamia are the churches of Mar Sovo at Hah and el-Harda at Hah, the church at Arnas, and the church at Kefr Zeh, in which the conch of an apse is decorated with a cross carved in stone. The first of them dates to the sixth century and the three other were erected later, probably before 750.²⁴³

3.1. The Christian site on Sir Bani Yas island

3.1.1. Geography, the history of excavations and structure of the monastery complex

Sir Bani Yas is a so-called 'desert island' located in the emirate of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, 9 km offshore from the small port of Jabal Dhanna. It stretches 17.5 km north-south and 9 km east-west. The monastery on Sir Bani Yas island, known as SBY 9, is located in the eastern part of the island, close to the shore, in the area known as al-Hawr.²⁴⁴ Natural landforms of the island as well as its indigenous fauna and flora had been greatly affected in the late 80s, prior to any archaeological activity there, by a project of tree planting and introducing new species of animals (the gazelle, onyx, ostrich and other). Bulldozing the land in order to plant trees had especially disrupted the surface of what was later recognized as archaeological sites on the island.²⁴⁵ The site SBY 9 was identified in March 1992 when an archaeological survey of the whole island

²⁴² For examples of figural sculptures from northern Mesopotamia see Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 166–167, 173, 177–178, 180; two examples of human representations from churches of the East Syriac church: a stucco torso from Koke and a capital from the monastery of Abraham of Kashkar representing a bearded man have been discussed by Mundell (1977), 61–62. One other example, a small plaque with a figure of a saint found in Susa, may be also mentioned here, Gyselen (2006).

²⁴³ Mundell (1977), 65–66.

²⁴⁴ King (1997), 221; King (1998), 11, 20–27, Fig. 4; Beech (2009), Fig. 2.

²⁴⁵ Elders (2001), 48–49; Beech (2009), 101.

was conducted by the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey (ADIAS).²⁴⁶ The site was greatly affected by the planting project as bushes were present there in intervals of approximately 5 meters and the surface of the entire site seemed to be destroyed by heavy machinery works.²⁴⁷ Initial excavations of the site were carried out in 1993 by Dr Joseph Elders, Dr Mark Beech and John Martin.



Fig. 28. Archaeological sites on Sir Bani Yas island.
Marked with a red dot is the monastery site SBY 9

Full scale excavations under the same supervision started in 1994 and were continued in seasons 1995 and 1996.²⁴⁸ As a result, a large monastery complex measuring approximately 70 x 90 meters and composed of a church, dormitories and other rooms

²⁴⁶ Beech (2009), 101–102; the total number of archaeological sites recorded on Sir Bani Yas by this survey and in the following years was 41.

²⁴⁷ Beech (2009), 105; King (1997), 223–224.

²⁴⁸ King (1997), 224–225; Beech (2009), 102, 105–106.

(such as a kitchen) was revealed (Fig. 29).²⁴⁹ The entrance to the complex led from the east where remains of a wall with a gate were excavated.²⁵⁰ Adjoining the gate from the north and stretching to the west was a platform of unknown function. West of the platform, also adjoining the wall, was found the burial of a man. Lack of a great number of the bones of the skeleton prevented any closer identification of the individual.²⁵¹ The main building of the site – the church – was located north-west of the entrance and measured approximately 16.5 x 11.5 meters.²⁵² North of the church stretched a courtyard cut in bedrock and levelled off with clay, which separated it from the monastery buildings.²⁵³ Large parts of the domestic section of the monastery complex still awaits excavation²⁵⁴ and the only part which has been unearthed entirely is its north-eastern perimeter, the so-called northern dormitory and the eastern dormitory.²⁵⁵

²⁴⁹ Beech (2009), 107.

²⁵⁰ Beech (2009), Fig. 7.

²⁵¹ Beech (2009), 106.

²⁵² Exact measurements: the east wall: 11.5m, the west wall: 11.5m, the north wall: 16.9m, the south wall: 16.4m. Measured by the present author on the basis of an unpublished plan of the site produced by the Abu Dhabi TCA in 2009. Note that these measurements differ greatly from measurements that have been given by Hellyer: 14 x 5 meters, Hellyer (2001), 81. These dimensions are clearly impossible taking into account the shape of the building, which is close to square. This mistake is probably a result of Hellyer's misreading of King who has explained that the measurements of an original, one aisled structure was 14 x 4.5 meters, before the building was extended by adding two side aisles, King (1997), 227; for phases of the church structure see further in the text.

²⁵³ King (1997), 226.

²⁵⁴ Beech (2009), 107.

²⁵⁵ Beech (2009), Fig. 7.

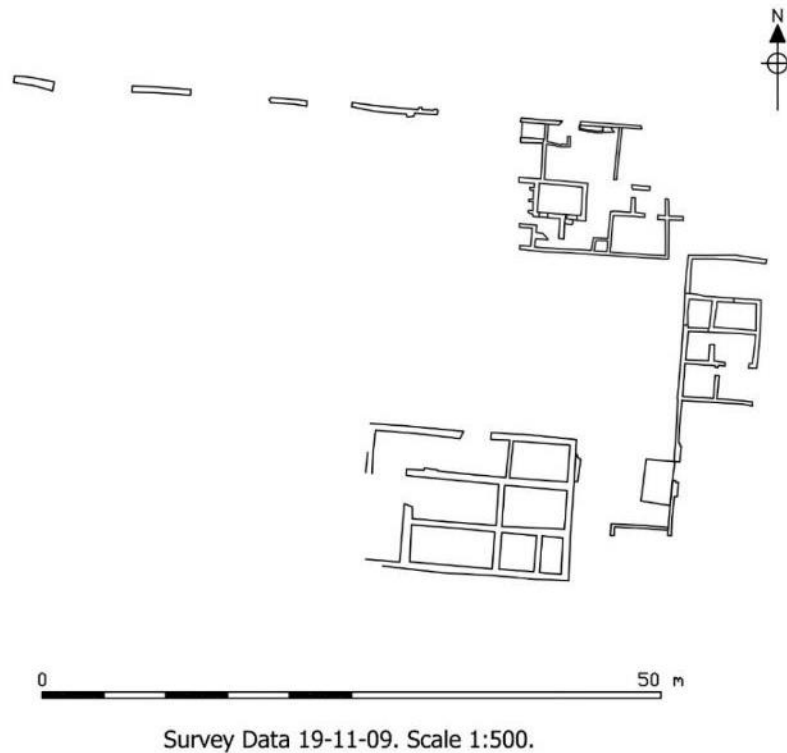


Fig. 29. Monastery enclosure on Sir Bani Yas, an unpublished plan

3.1.2. The church

The church located within the SBY 9 monastery complex was a three-aisled structure with full walls between aisles and a large narthex from the west (Fig. 30). Communication between the main and lateral aisles was provided by narrow doorways. The eastern part of the church was tripartite and its southern room was further divided into two parts on the north-south axis. In the floor of the south-eastern room were unearthed two oval hollows (Fig. 32) and it has been suggested that they indicate a place where a ladder leading to a bell tower was originally placed.²⁵⁶ Although the existence of a tower at this site is probable, it seems that the aforementioned hollows do not provide enough argument to support this hypothesis and it should be rejected until new evidence

²⁵⁶ Elders (2001), 51. Note that Elders has described these hollows as located in the north-eastern room of the church. This is clearly a mistake as in fact the hollows are still clearly visible on the site and are certainly located in the south-eastern room.

appears.²⁵⁷ Another interesting feature of this room is a small plastered elevation located in its north-eastern corner. Elders has argued that it could have been a cupboard for books, liturgical vessels or similar items²⁵⁸ but in the lack of evidence its function remains unclear. West of the aforementioned small room and adjacent to it was another, slightly bigger room. In its floor, positioned centrally, was a round cavity filled with ash.²⁵⁹ It has been suggested that it may indicate a place where Eucharistic bread was being baked²⁶⁰ but that there is very little to support this theory and thus it is rather unconvincing.

²⁵⁷ Elder's observation that the partition wall between the room with the hollows and the chancel is of 'increased thickness' in order to support the weight of the tower finds confirmation neither in the detailed plan of the church nor in examination of the remains, see: Elders (2001), 51; Beech (2009), Fig. 7.

²⁵⁸ Elders (2001), 51.

²⁵⁹ Elders (2001), 51; Beech (2009), Fig. 7.

²⁶⁰ Elders (2001), 51.

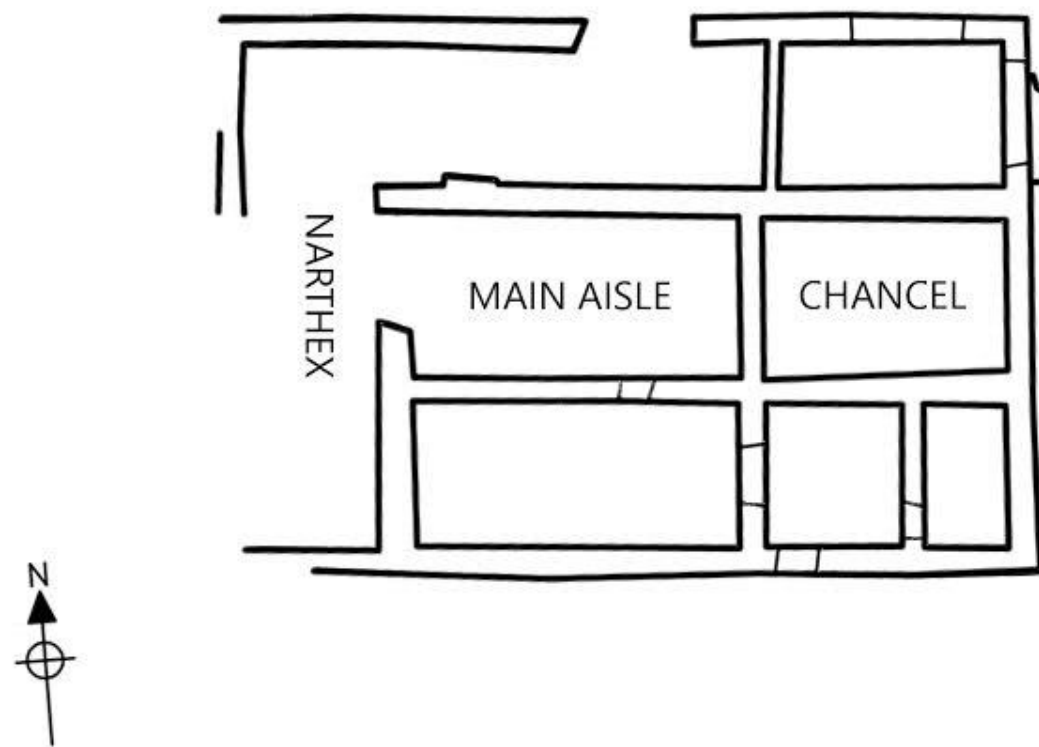


Fig. 30. Church on Sir Bani Yas island



Fig. 31. Remains of the church on Sir Bani Yas, view from the west



Fig. 32. South-eastern room of the church, visible two hollows in the floor

It is widely acknowledged that the church was not built in a single campaign but in two phases. There is, however, some disagreement on which parts of the building belong to which phase. In Geoffrey King's opinion, initially only the main aisle and the chancel were

erected and it was later that side aisles were added.²⁶¹ Elders, one of the excavators of the site, has argued, however, that the first solid construction at the site comprised the main and south aisles, the chancel and the south chamber divided into two small rooms. In the later phase the structure was extended by adding the north aisle and the narthex and floors of the church were re-plastered.²⁶²

An issue of high importance but largely neglected so far in the scholarship on the Sir Bani Yas church is the question of the structural relationship between the main and lateral aisles and roofing. Two scholars who have mentioned this matter incidentally in their publications are Elders and Robert Carter. The first scholar has strongly claimed that the church had been from the very beginning intended as a basilica, even though it obtained its final shape in two separate building campaigns. He seems to draw this conclusion from the fact that although in the first phase only the main and south aisles were completed, at least some parts of the north aisle were also standing at that time.²⁶³ Also Carter has referred to the 'classic basilica plan' of the church but it seems that in fact he has equated a three-aisle ground plan with a basilical structure.²⁶⁴ That the church on Sir Bani Yas was indeed a basilica is quite probable and there are some examples of basilical churches from northern Mesopotamia that could serve as comparanda.²⁶⁵ I would like, however, to suggest a different possibility. It seems that in fact there is no strong argument that the north aisle was even partially constructed in the first phase. As Elders has admitted, it was not plastered in the first phase, no doorways connecting the north aisle with the main aisle were yet in place and the narthex was certainly erected only in the second phase.²⁶⁶ It seems that there may be an easier explanation for different phases of the building and that the church was not necessarily intended as 'a classic basilica'.²⁶⁷ If one thinks about the Sir Bani Yas church in its first phase as a building comprising of only two aisles, this makes this structure strikingly similar to the

²⁶¹ King (1997), 227.

²⁶² Elders (2001), 50–51.

²⁶³ Elders (2001), 49–50.

²⁶⁴ Carter (2008), 73.

²⁶⁵ Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 40–48.

²⁶⁶ Elders (2001), 50–51.

²⁶⁷ Elders (2001), 50.

well-known type of 'hall churches' (also known as 'parochial churches') of northern Mesopotamia, especially of the region of Ṭur 'Abdin.²⁶⁸ This type of church has been discussed in details by Elif Keser-Kayaalp who gives plans of twenty five churches, all of which had the nave accessible from the south narthex of the same length as the aisle (Figs 33-34).²⁶⁹

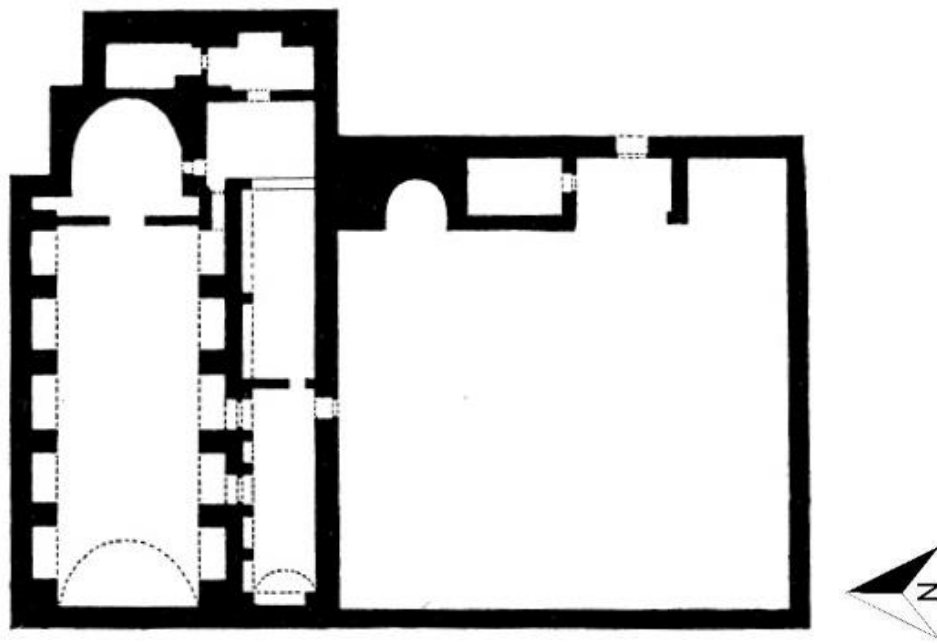


Fig. 33. Church of Mar Azaziel at Kefr Zeh

²⁶⁸ Bell and Mango (1982), viii, 56

²⁶⁹ Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 95–96; pl. 76.

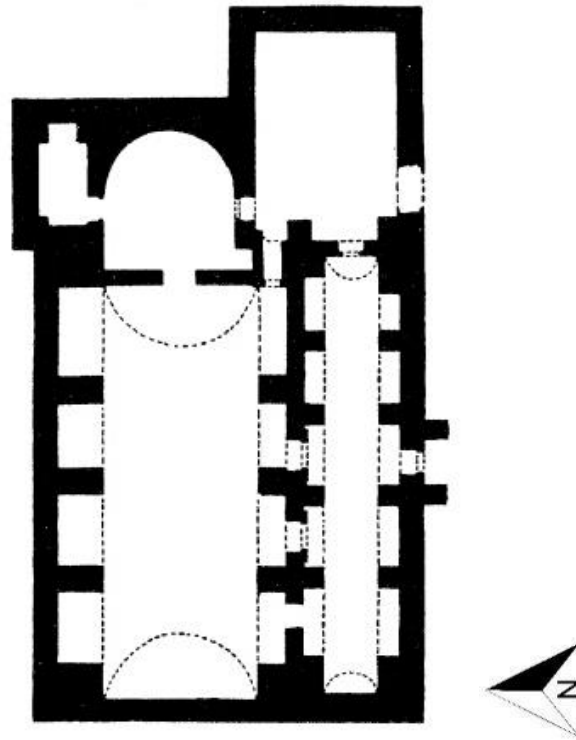


Fig. 34. Church of Mar Cyriacus at Arnas

If we take now a standard northern Mesopotamian church of this type as a reference point for the SBY church then its south aisle would be in fact a south narthex. Interestingly, in each of the hall churches in northern Mesopotamia there is a full wall between the nave and the south narthex with only narrow doorways communicating between the two spaces, just as most probably there was in the Sir Bani Yas church. This feature is also very well known for southern Mesopotamian and Gulf churches (‘Ain Sha‘ia, Failaka, ‘Akkaz, Kharg), which are all three-aisled buildings with narthexes. It could have been, therefore, that the standard church plan of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf with a three-aisled nave, tripartite sanctuary and full walls between aisles is a result of the hall type churches of northern Mesopotamia mixed with a tripartite ground plan (which could have derived from a standard, early Christian three-aisled basilica). There is no evidence that other southern Mesopotamian and Gulf region churches were built originally as so-called ‘hall churches’ with south narthexes and therefore the question of how their naves were constructed remains open. In the case of Sir Bani Yas church, however, it seems to be very probable that the church was never

a basilical structure with windows above the level of side aisles, which lightened the main aisle. Instead, if it was built following the pattern of northern Mesopotamian churches, then from the very beginning the only light coming to the main aisle was via windows in the south narthex (ie the south aisle after the extension of the building) and a window in the eastern façade. This would certainly limit the access of sunlight to the building but, providing the level of insolation in the region, it could have been sufficient. It should be noted here that Elders has provided some evidence that the main aisle was in fact higher than the lateral aisles.²⁷⁰ This, however, does still not prove that the church was of a basilical structure as it simply could have been a pseudo-basilica where the main nave was covered by a gable roof and side aisles by sloping roofs.²⁷¹

The question of vaulting of the Sir Bani Yas church is difficult to answer due to lack of evidence. The only indication has been provided by Elders who has mentioned that a 'large piece of masonry with a curved, inner surface, which curved in all planes' was found at the site and that it could have composed 'at least a fake semi-dome at the east end'.²⁷² This possibility seems to be supported by examples of many northern Mesopotamian churches dated to the sixth to eighth centuries, which are internally vaulted.²⁷³ More importantly, the well-known churches excavated at al-Hira and Koke, both belonging to the same Church of East, were also covered with barrel vaults.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Elders (2001), 51.

²⁷¹ This reconstruction of roofing has been firstly suggested by Elders (2001), 51.

²⁷² Elders (2011), 51.

²⁷³ Bell and Mango (1982), viii; Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 156–158.

²⁷⁴ Rice (1932), 279; Reuther (1929), 449.

3.2. Decorative stuccoes from the church at the site SBY 9

Fragments of stucco and plaster compose the largest category of finds at the church site on Sir Bani Yas.²⁷⁵ The total number of pieces is approximately 350 and about a half of them are decorated with moulded geometric and floral designs.²⁷⁶ Although most of them are of rather inconsiderable size (a few centimetres by a few centimetres) there are also several dozen fragments where at least one of the dimensions exceeds 10 cm and a few fragments of friezes where one of the dimensions exceeds 20 cm. There are also some pieces that compose larger fragments of friezes and the length of these composite stuccoes is up to 41 cm.²⁷⁷

3.2.1. History and scholarship

Single pieces of stucco were found at the site of SBY 9 already during the preliminary survey. In excavation seasons 1994 – 1996 dozens of fragments were unearthed.²⁷⁸ Some further pieces were found at the site in 2009 and a few more in 2011.²⁷⁹ The style and iconography of Sir Bani Yas stuccoes have been a subject of many mentions and brief analyses in publications on the archaeology of the island and, more broadly, on Christianity in the Gulf. Underlined in them have been Classical, Roman as well as

²⁷⁵ Based on the unpublished Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

²⁷⁶ The number of pieces from Sir Bani Yas listed in the catalogue of this thesis is lower because excluded from it are fragments, where the decoration is not legible. Since the excavations some smaller fragments seem to have been also destroyed. Note that one catalogue number may be assigned to a few pieces that are either very similar one to another or they join one another.

²⁷⁷ Based on the unpublished Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds from the site provided kindly by Dr Mark Beech and on examination of the stucco collection, which I conducted during my visits to Abu Dhabi. Note that in some cases longer fragments comprising of small, loose stucco pieces are known from archival photographs but it is now impossible to compose these small fragments in order to create similar friezes.

²⁷⁸ King (1997), 221–229; the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

²⁷⁹ Based on the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds and personal communication with Dr Mark Beech.

Sasanian influences²⁸⁰ and the affinity of stucco material from Sir Bani Yas to stucco decorations from other churches in the Gulf and southern Mesopotamia.²⁸¹

3.2.2. Typology

Fragments of stucco decoration were found inside and around the church building. Most of them were concentrated outside the east and north walls²⁸² and the highest volume of pieces occurred 'within a 2 meter radius of the central point in the chancel east wall', as has been noted by one of the excavators.²⁸³

All of the pieces found at the site of SBY 9 can be ascribed, on the basis of their shape and surface decoration, to one of six types.²⁸⁴ All these types are described below, starting with the one that is represented by the largest number of pieces, through those exemplified by worse-preserved fragments and into types 5 and 6, for which only random examples and archaeological data is available. The aim here is to reconstruct the original design of the pieces. For some types (1 and 2 in particular but also type 4) this is an easy task as we have fragments that are decorated with closed and complete compositions and we can easily imagine that an entire decoration was made by simply multiplying them. For some other fragments (type 3) a probable reconstruction can be proposed. For stuccoes of types 5 and 6 even this is impossible as it cannot be determined how the isolated fragments that have survived functioned within larger compositions.

²⁸⁰ Elders (2001), 51.

²⁸¹ Carter (2008), 75, 91–92, 97.

²⁸² Based on the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds, which gives coordinates of most of the finds.

²⁸³ Elders (2001), 51.

²⁸⁴ This typology, although created by the present author, is largely based on a typology proposed by and used in the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

Type 1

Decoration composed of two friezes joined together: a frieze decorated with a vine scroll filled with bunches of grapes and palm leaves and a frieze decorated with stepped, close-to-square fields filled with a motif of a small flower or a cross (for example cat. nos 123, 135–136, 144, 145, 159–167, 169–172, 176–179, 186–187, 190–196, 200).

While many pieces of the vine scroll frieze were found at the site, only two pieces with stepped fields are currently preserved (cat. nos 131, 187)²⁸⁵ and none of the existing fragments presents the two friezes joined. However, a photograph published in an article by King shows a fragment of a stucco, now lost, which was clearly composed of the two friezes: one with a vine scroll and another one with stepped fields (Fig. 35). This indicates that this is how the decoration of this kind originally looked and is further supported by the fact that many of the fragments decorated with vine scrolls preserved a rough upper edge proving that there was a continuation of the decoration in the upper register (Fig. 36). Another argument for this reconstruction comes from a comparison with a similar double frieze from the monastery site on Kharg island on the Iranian side of the Gulf. It shows a strip decorated with a vine scroll, strikingly similar to the one from SBY friezes of type 1, below which there is another frieze decorated with stepped triangles or pyramids (cat. no 106, Figs 38–39).²⁸⁶ The surface of the piece decorated with a vine scroll meets the other frontal surface at an angle of approximately 145–150 degrees (Fig. 37).

²⁸⁵ One of these pieces was found in an unknown location.

²⁸⁶ Hardy-Guilbert (2003), pl. 12. 4–5.

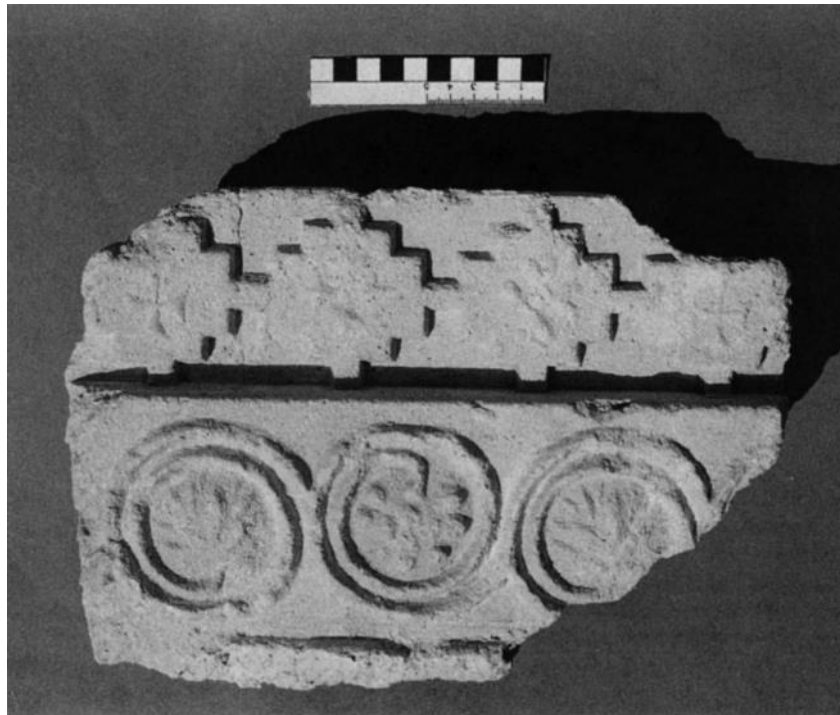


Fig. 35. Fragment of type 1 decoration



Fig. 36. Fragment of type 1 decoration, marked with red arrows are the upper rough edge and the lower protruding edge of the frieze with vine scroll

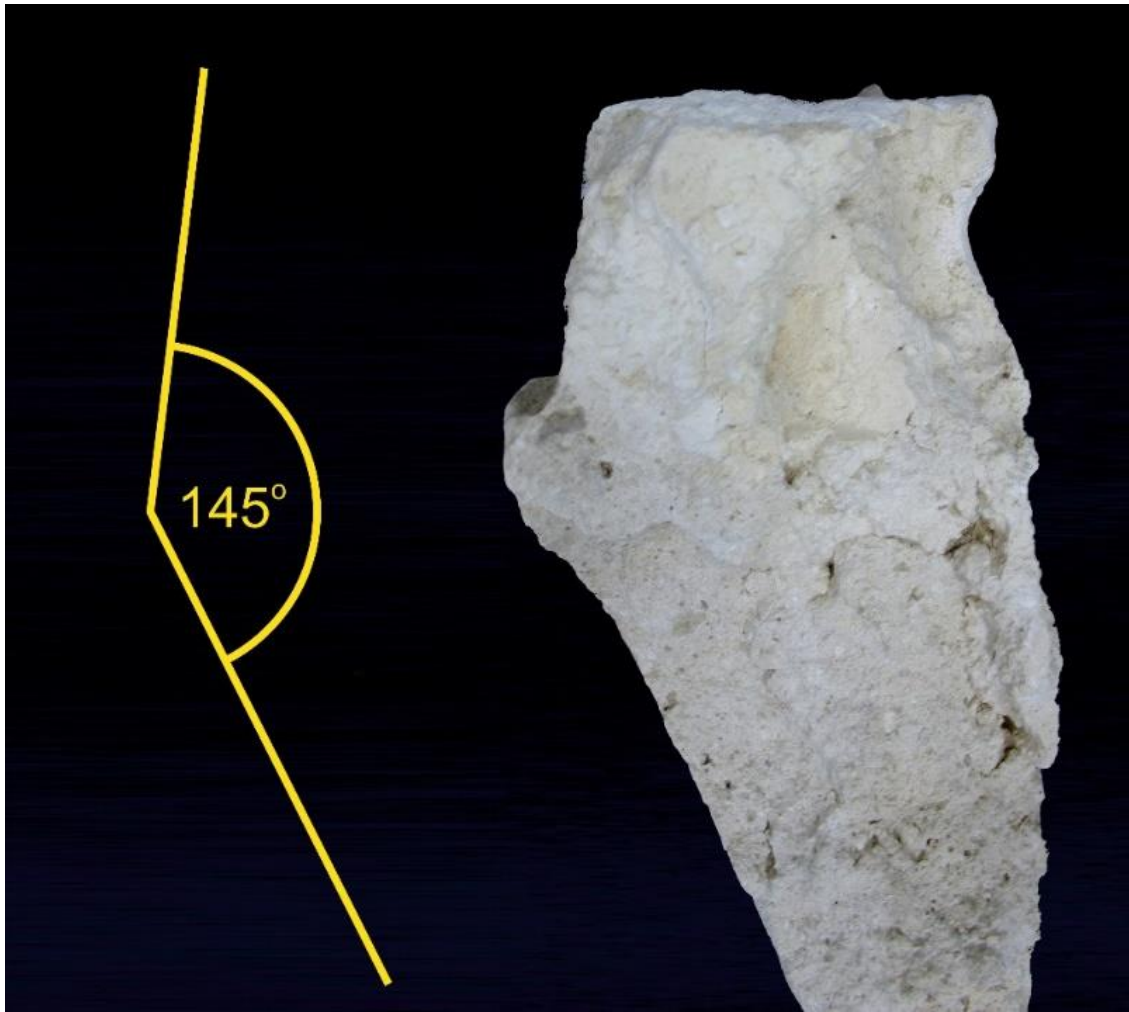


Fig. 37. Fragment of type 1 decoration, side view, marked is an angle of 145-150 degrees between two frontal surfaces



Fig. 38. Fragment of a frieze from a church on Kharg island

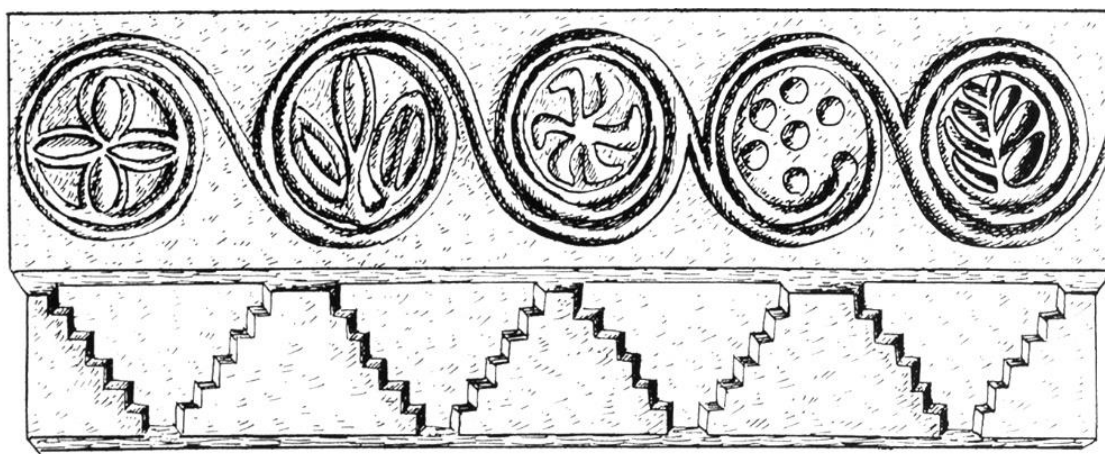


Fig. 39. Reconstruction of decoration of a frieze from a church on Kharg island

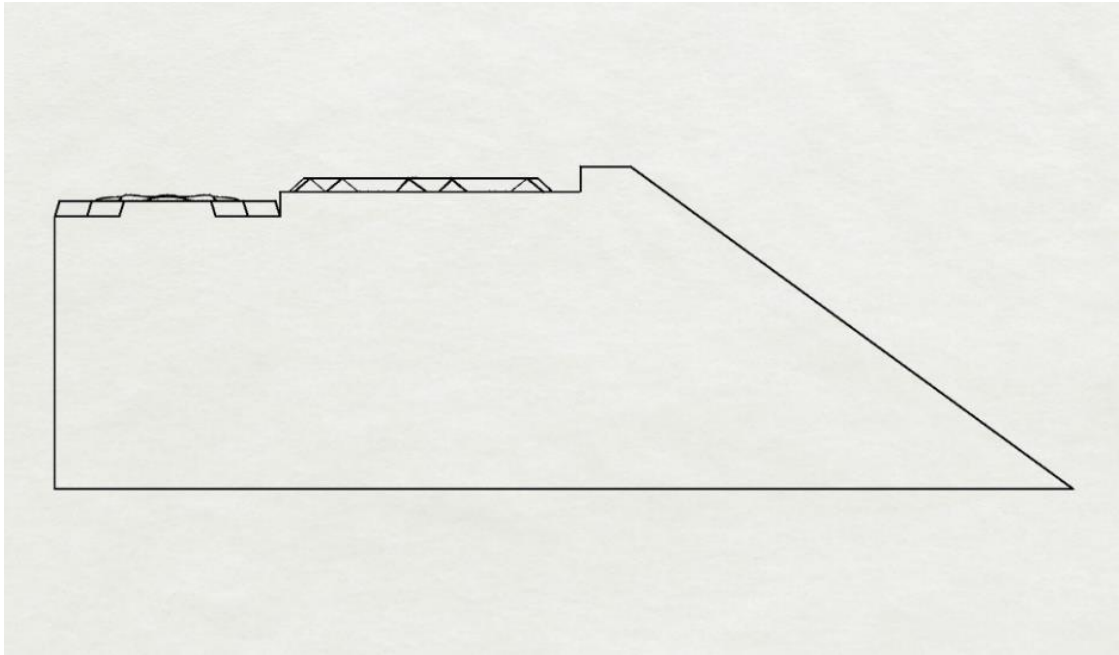


Fig. 40. Reconstruction of type 1 decoration, side view, drawing by S. Bogdan

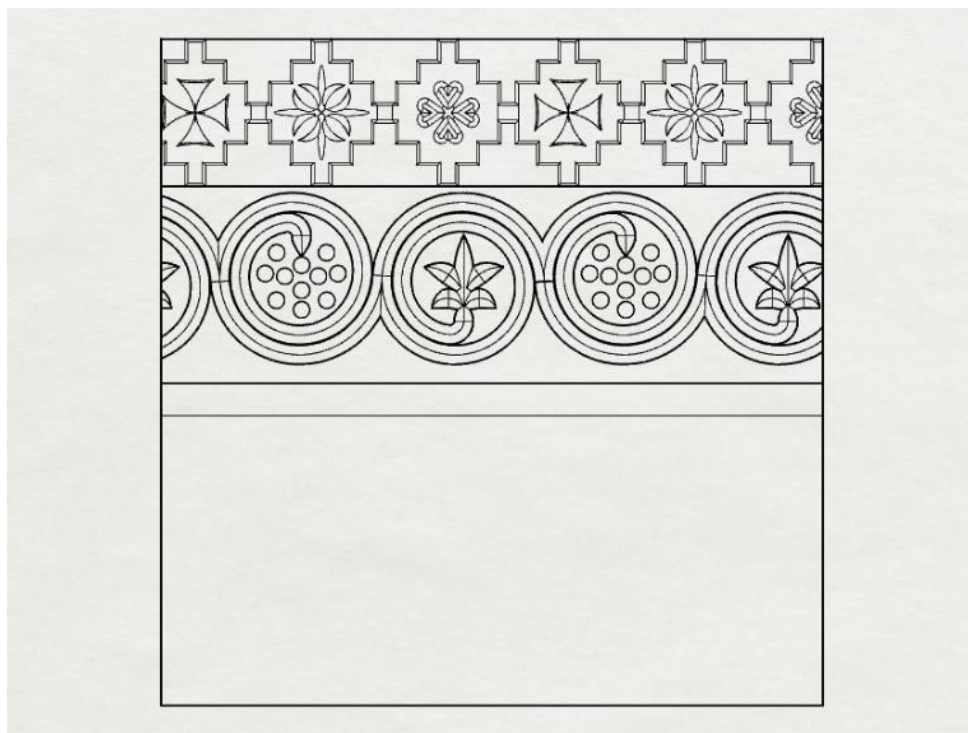


Fig. 41. Reconstruction of type 1 decoration, frontal view, drawing by S. Bogdan



Fig. 42. Reconstruction of type 1 decoration, computer reconstruction by S. Bogdan



Fig. 43. Fragments of the Type 1 frieze found in the narthex

Type 2

A frieze decorated with a vine scroll framed with 'strings of pearls' (knobs), filled with palmettes and crosses (see for example cat. nos 126–127, 136–137, 143, 146, 168, 180, 182–183, 185, 188–189, 198–199)

Below the lower edge of many preserved pieces there are undecorated stucco surfaces visible (cat. nos 182, 188). This indicates that originally the frieze with a vine scroll and 'pearls' joined another panel, possibly of undecorated smooth plaster. This is further supported by the aforementioned decoration of type 1 where a similar design of two parallel friezes was introduced.

Type 3

Plaques with a representation of a cross on a stepped base and with leaves at both sides. This central image is surrounded with an arched frame of two parallel lines with stepped motifs in corners (cat. nos 124, 133, 138, 147–148, 150, 181, 197)

Plaques of this type are preserved only fragmentally. Two adjoining pieces of a plaque of this type (no 1207, cat. no 150) show a vertical beam of a cross terminated with a roundel decorated with a small cross. The beam is supported by a stepped base, from which a leaf springs upwards filling the composition left of the cross. It is most certain that its counterpart was originally framing the cross at the other side. Located in the lower left corner of the joining fragments is a section of parallel lines terminated with a stepped motif. Another small fragment (no 1157, cat. no 138) represents almost a mirror-image of the stepped motif. The upper part of the cross is not preserved. There is, however, one fragment (no 391, cat. no 124) with two parallel lines terminated with what seems to be a part of a similar stepped motif as the one visible on the aforementioned fragment no 1207. The lines on the piece 391 are curved in a way that indicates an arch. The space between the two lines is very similar to that of the fragment no 1207 and both therefore seem to belong to the same type of decoration. If this

interpretation is correct then in the original composition the cross was most probably placed under an arch. In sum, it seems most probable that plaques of type 3 were representing a cross on a stepped base, framed at both sides with leaves, all within an arched frame created by two thin lines (Fig. 44). This reconstruction is further confirmed by examples of very similar designs from southern Mesopotamian and the Gulf sites of al-Hira (cat. nos 37–38) and from al-Qusur of Failaka (cat. no 52, Figs. 45–46).²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Nasir (2014), Figs 1–2, 5, 7, 9; Okada (1990), Fig. 2; Bernard, Salles (1991), Fig. 2; see Chapter 4 for a discussion on the similarity between the reconstructed plaque from Sir Bani Yas and the al-Qusur panel.



Fig. 44. Partial reconstruction of a type 3 plaque on the basis of remaining pieces, reconstruction in a graphic program, Abu Dhabi TCA



Fig. 45. Stucco panel from the monastery site on Failaka island

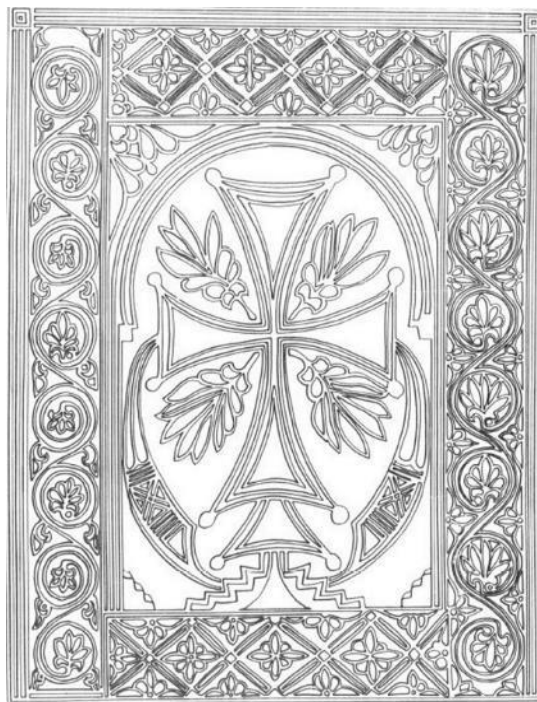


Fig. 46. Stucco panel from the monastery site on Failaka island

Four other pieces belonging to the same type and not included in the above reconstruction are known from Sir Bani Yas. Two of them are decorated with simple, parallel lines, one with a stepped base, and one with a fragment of a leaf. The leaf on the latter one (no 1144, cat. no 133) springs leftwards, just as it does in the fragment composing the reconstructed plaque and the base on the fragment 1571 (cat. no 197) is identical with the base on the large fragment no 1207. This proves that there were at least two plaques of this type created on the island and there is a possibility that decorations of this type were produced in larger quantities.

Type 4

Plaques decorated with 'palm trees' and 'fleur-de-lis' (cat. nos 122, 134, 151, 155–156, 158, 173–174, 184, 201, 205)

The design of this type is best visible on a fragment of stucco decoration composed of three joining pieces (no inventory number). Its sharp edges indicate that originally stuccoes of this type were formed as square or rectangular plaques (cat. no 205). In the centre of the decoration is a small cross enclosed in a circle. On four axes of this circle foliage motifs similar to palm trees are represented and between them small fleur-de-lis motifs are visible. This central composition is surrounded by crosses of equal arms. In the lower left corner of the plaque fragments of another palm tree and a circle with a cross are visible, which indicates that this design was multiplied on a number of plaques which were subsequently mounted together on walls in a tile-like manner.

Type 5

Small fragments decorated with a stepped pyramidal shape (cat. nos 121, 125, 139)

Only four, fragmentally preserved pieces of this type are preserved and it is therefore difficult to conclude whether the stepped motifs constituted originally a part of a larger composition. It should be excluded that these pieces belong to type 3 as stepped bases on fragments of type 3 are very much of a different shape.

Type 6

Small fragments moulded to a shape of a stepped pyramid (cat. nos 157, 175)

Similarly as in the case of type 5, very little can be said on the original design of type 6 (only two pieces are preserved). It should be noted here that the main difference between stuccoes of type 5 and 6 is that while on the fragments of type 5 the stepped motif is visible against the background of undecorated stucco, in type 6 the whole fragment is moulded to a shape of a stepped pyramid.

3.2.3. Technique

Clear recurrence of designs of stuccoes from the church leaves no doubt that, although particular fragments could have been treated with a chisel for final touches, they were all firstly moulded. Shapes of stuccoes of different types indicate that two different techniques were employed. Friezes of type 1 and 2 were most probably mounted and moulded directly on walls of the building. The hypothetical method in which friezes of type 1 could have been produced is shown in the illustration 47. In the first step

a wooden support enabled wet stucco to be laid on the wall of the building. Later, wooden moulds were used in order to press decorative strips in stucco, each of them separately. Stuccoes of other types were most probably produced as portable plaques and also pressed out of moulds.

In their current state of preservation stuccoes excavated at site SBY 9 do not exhibit any traces of paint. There is, however, a brief mention in an article by King that some pieces had slight traces of red colour.²⁸⁸ One of the photographs preserved at the Abu Dhabi TCA also shows a very small fragment of plaster with what seems to be a trace of black paint.²⁸⁹ This convincingly demonstrates that it is probable that stucco decoration of the Sir Bani Yas church was at least partially painted. This would be in fact in accordance with other Christian sites in the neighbouring region of southern Mesopotamia. Red, black, blue, orange and other colours are testified for stuccoes from sites of Koke, al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia²⁹⁰ No evidence for painted stucco decoration comes from other Christian sites in the Gulf beside one of the stucco panels from the site of al-Qusur.

²⁸⁸ King (1997), 229.

²⁸⁹ It was also identified as such in the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

²⁹⁰ Painting of stuccoes in the region will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

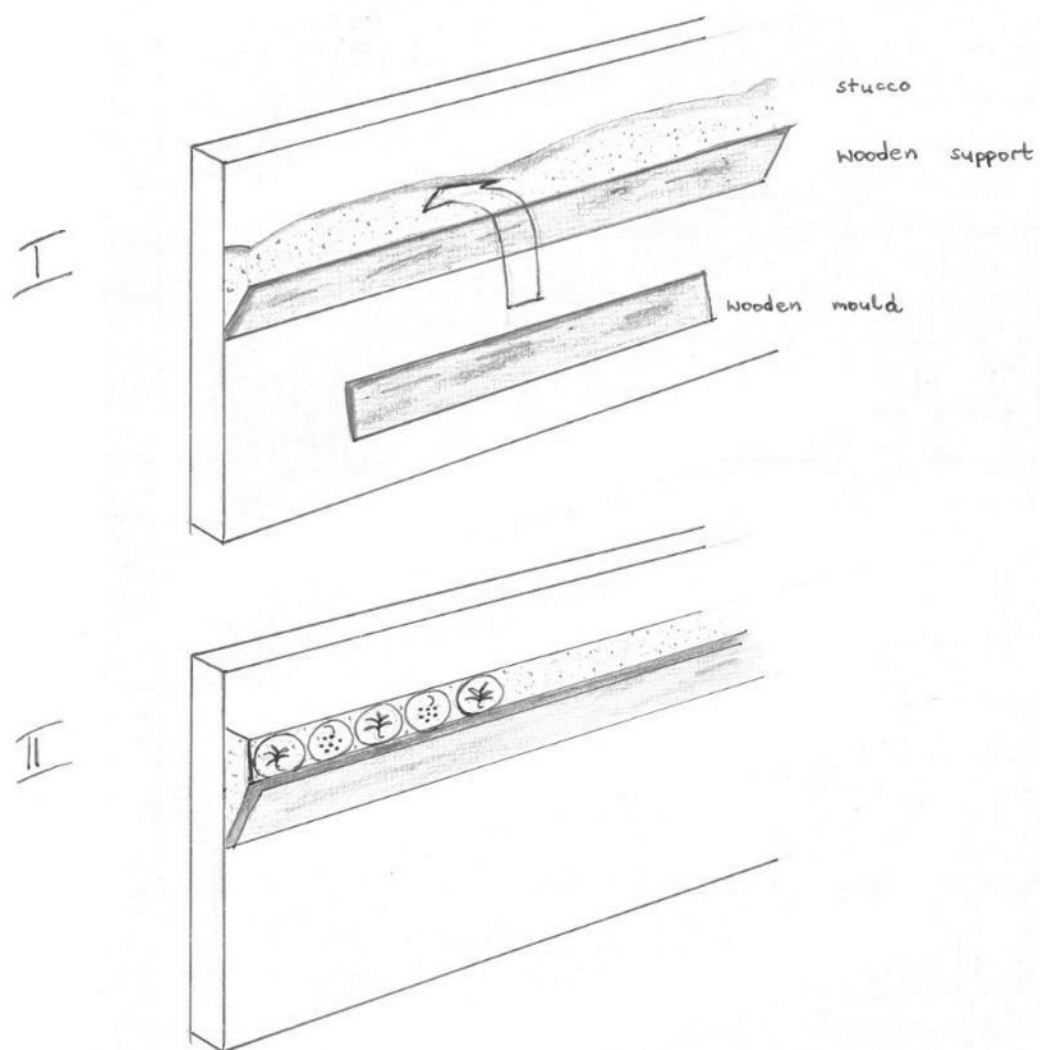


Fig. 47. Technique of production of type 1 decoration

3.3. Spatial distribution of stuccoes and reconstruction of the decorative programme

3.3.1. The chart representing spatial distribution of stucco – principles and limitations

The spatial distribution of stuccoes of all six types is represented in the chart below (Fig. 49). In order to produce the clearest possible result undisturbed by any random data, only pieces which meet two requirements have been processed in the preparation of this chart. The first one is that the precise location of a piece at the time of excavation is known and the second is that a fragment can be securely assigned to one of the six types (see Fig. 48). For this reason all the pieces for which coordinates of a find locus are unknown and those poorly preserved, with illegible surfaces as well as very small fragments were removed from the database, on the basis of which the chart was generated. Each piece that meets the aforementioned requirements is represented in the chart by a dot and placed in its correct locus on the grid of coordinates. For sake of clarity each of the types is represented with a different colour²⁹¹:

Type 1 (a vine scroll with palmettes and bunches of grapes) – blue

Type 2 (a vine scroll and a 'string of pearls') – red

Type 3 (a cross under an arch) – green

Type 4 (a cross in a circle and palm trees) – yellow

Type 5 (pieces decorated with stepped motifs) – purple

Type 6 (pieces cut to a shape of stepped motifs) – black

The foundation rule of the chart is that it represents all the locations in which stucco fragments were found and does not necessarily reflect the amount of material that was collected in particular areas. This rule has been established for two reasons. Firstly, what

²⁹¹ Detailed description of principles and limitations of this chart can be found in Appendix 1 to this chapter.

is crucial for understanding how particular types functioned within the space of the building is to know where pieces of particular types were found. Quantity of pieces found at particular loci provides additional information, which may be interesting and helpful, but is not essential for the task formulated in this chapter. Secondly, it would be very difficult to determine what amount of stucco was excavated at a particular locus. The Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue provides information about quantity of pieces found at a spot but sizes of pieces vary greatly. To calculate the mass of the pieces would be equally pointless as some of the pieces are rather thin and only their decorated surfaces are preserved while some other still keep layers of rough stucco that were structurally bonded with walls.

As a consequence of this principle, dots representing particular loci are not multiplied if two or more pieces of the same type were found at a single spot. It is not rare in the catalogue of finds that two pieces found at one, single locus, in one archaeological context, presenting the same type of decoration and – in many cases – joining one another – are marked with two different inventory numbers. For the sake of clarity and in accordance with this main rule they were not represented separately but one dot marks the locus where both of them were found.

In the case of two pieces of type 3 found northeast to the church the opposite happened. Two pieces which without doubt had originally formed one plaque were found at two separate loci. In order to keep consistency throughout the entire chart the two pieces of one plaque were represented with separate dots.

Dots representing loci on the chart are semi-transparent, which allows to see clearly those places in which pieces of different types were found at one single spot or very close one to another. Particularly interesting is the case is a dot at 488/582, the unique colour of which is a result of a mix between blue colour of a dot representing type 1 and red colour of a dot representing type 2.

It has to be remembered that the distribution of stucco as represented in the chart must have been affected by the heavy machinery works conducted at the site prior to excavations. The scope and character of these disturbances is, however, impossible to fully determine. A clue is provided by a plan of the site (Figs 51–52), on which are marked scratches to walls and plaster walls left by the bulldozer working at the site prior to archaeological excavations. It is clear from this plan that the bulldozer was moving on one axis (south-west to north-east or reversely). This would explain why so many stucco fragments were found north-east to the church: they could have been simply pushed by the moving vehicle.

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6
North-west to the church			592.23 N, 465.475 E			
Narthex	577.074 N, 468.978 E					
	578.509 N, 469.154 E					
	578.954 N, 469.193 E					
South to the church	571 N, 477.75 E					
South aisle					575.1 N, 476 E	
South room				571.603 N, 479.583 E		
East to the south room		571.9 N, 486.1 E				
East to the chancel	576.7 N, 484.75 E	576.5 N, 484.8 E		575.8 N, 485.7 E		
	575.8 N, 484.8 E	577 N, 484.9 E		578.8 N, 487.9 E		
	576 N, 484.9 E	577.9 N, 485 E		576 N, 488.8 E		
	576.75 N, 485 E	577 N, 485.2 E				
	576 N, 485 E	575.832 N, 497.005 E				
	576.2 N, 485.1 E					
	576 N, 485.8 E					
North aisle	581 N, 471 E					
	580.5 N, 471 E					
	580.4 N, 478.5 E					
	581 N, 477 E					
North room						581 N, 482 E

East to the north room		579.35 N, 486.4 E				
	582 N, 488 E					
North to the church	588 N, 478 E	590 N, 480 E	587 N, 477 E	587.5 N, 480 E		601.7 N, 482.1 E
				585 N, 480 E		
				589 N, 481 E		
North-east to the church	584 N, 484 E	588 N, 483 E	589.5 N, 487 E	587.5 N, 489.5 E	587 N, 488 E	
	585 N, 487 E	590.7 N, 487.64 E	589 N, 489 E		584 N, 484.9 E	
	597.397 N, 492.99 E	585 N, 486 E				

Fig. 48. Distribution of stucco at the site SBY 9

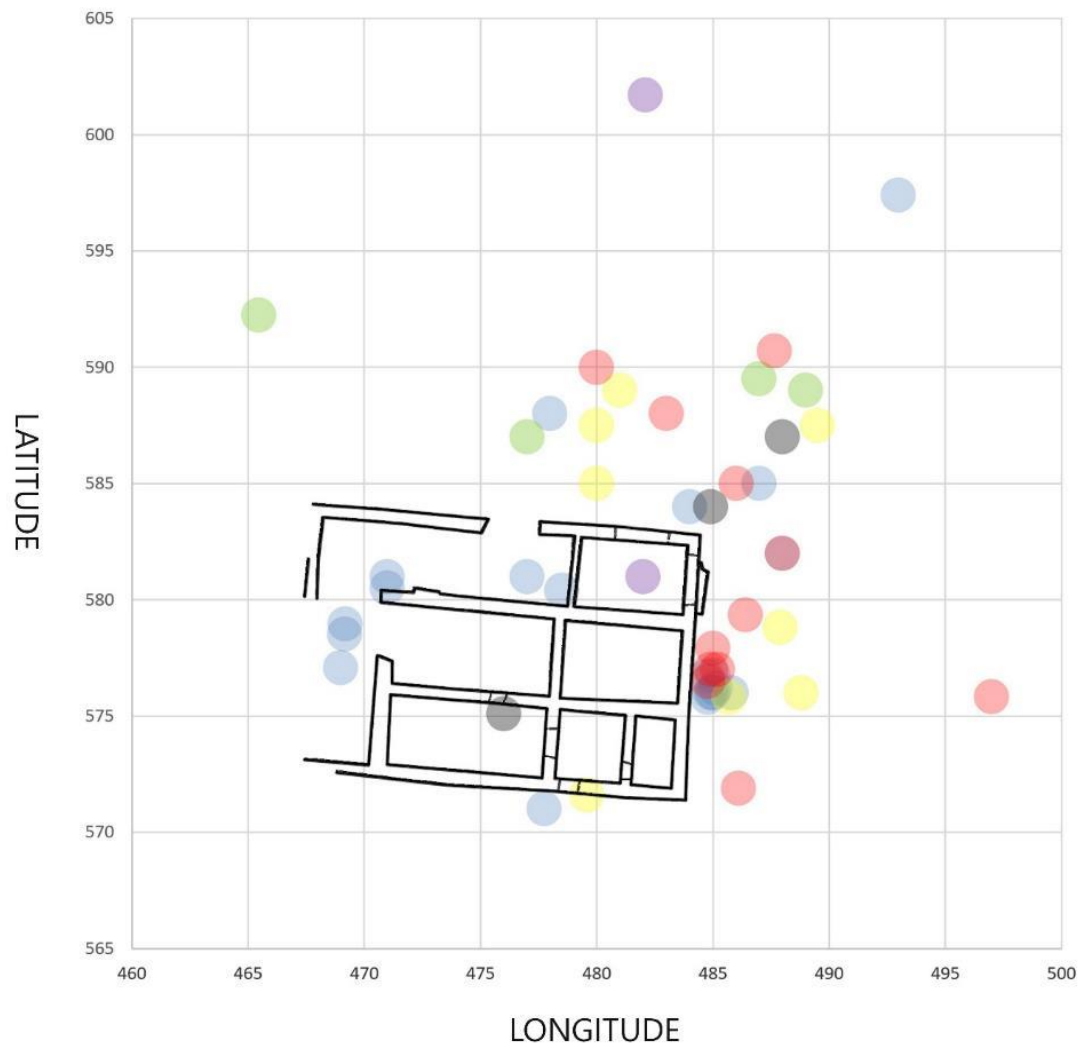


Fig. 49. Distribution of stucco at the site SBY 9

blue-type 1, red-type 2, green-type 3, yellow-type 4, black-type 5, purple-type 6

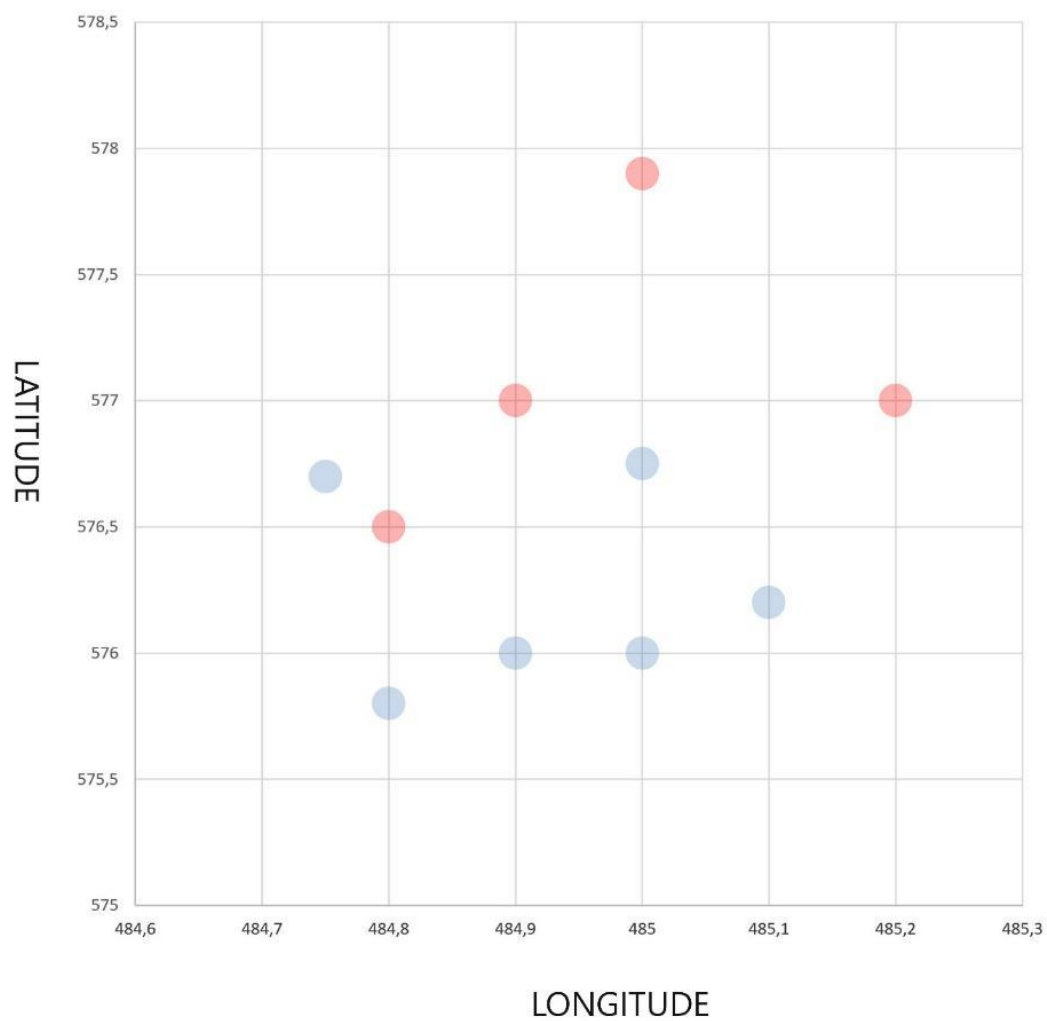


Fig. 50. Distribution of pieces of type 1 (blue) and type 2 (red) stuccoes east to the sanctuary of the church

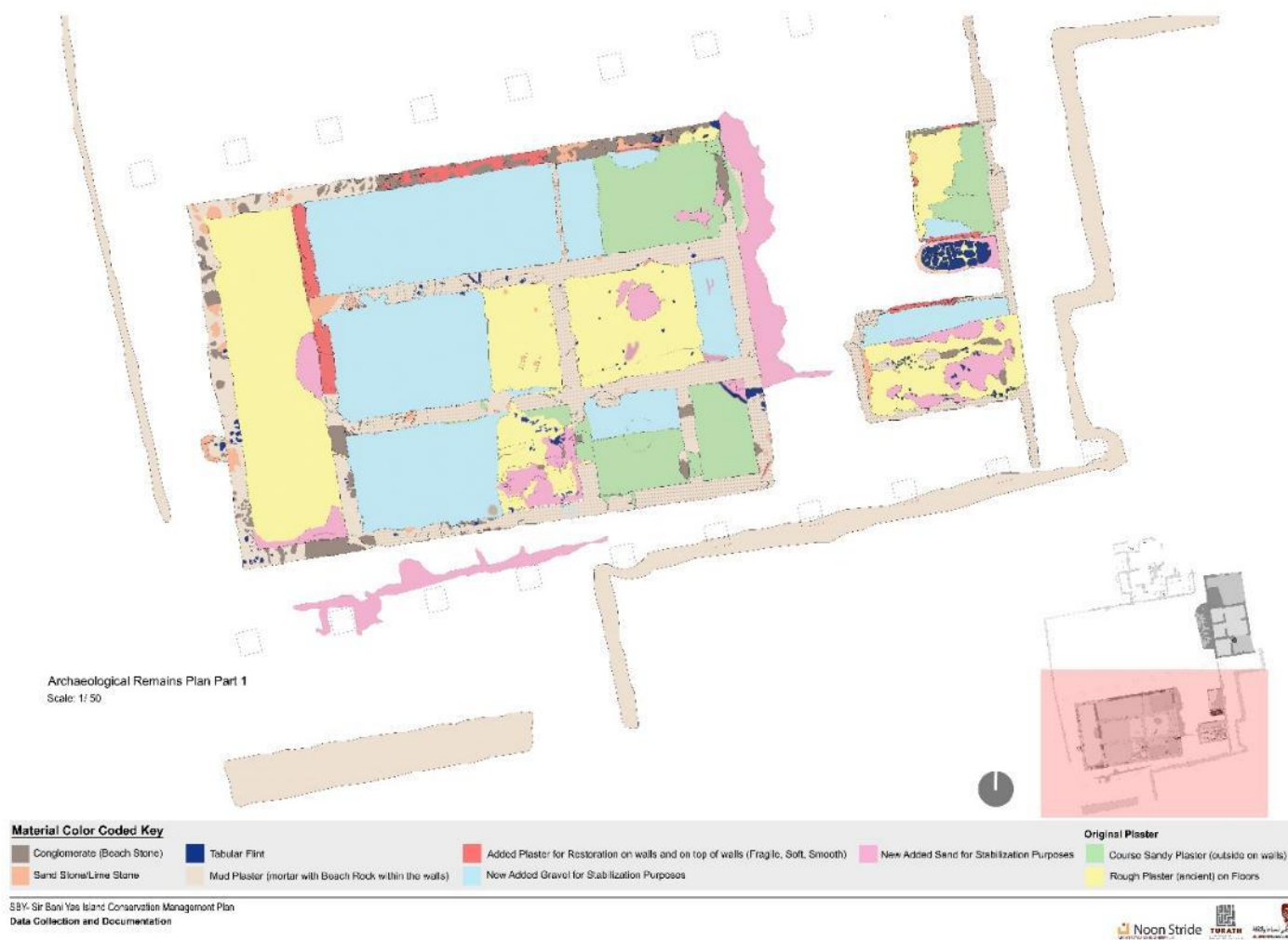


Fig. 51. Plan of archaeological remains of the church at the SBY9 site, courtesy of the Abu Dhabi TCA

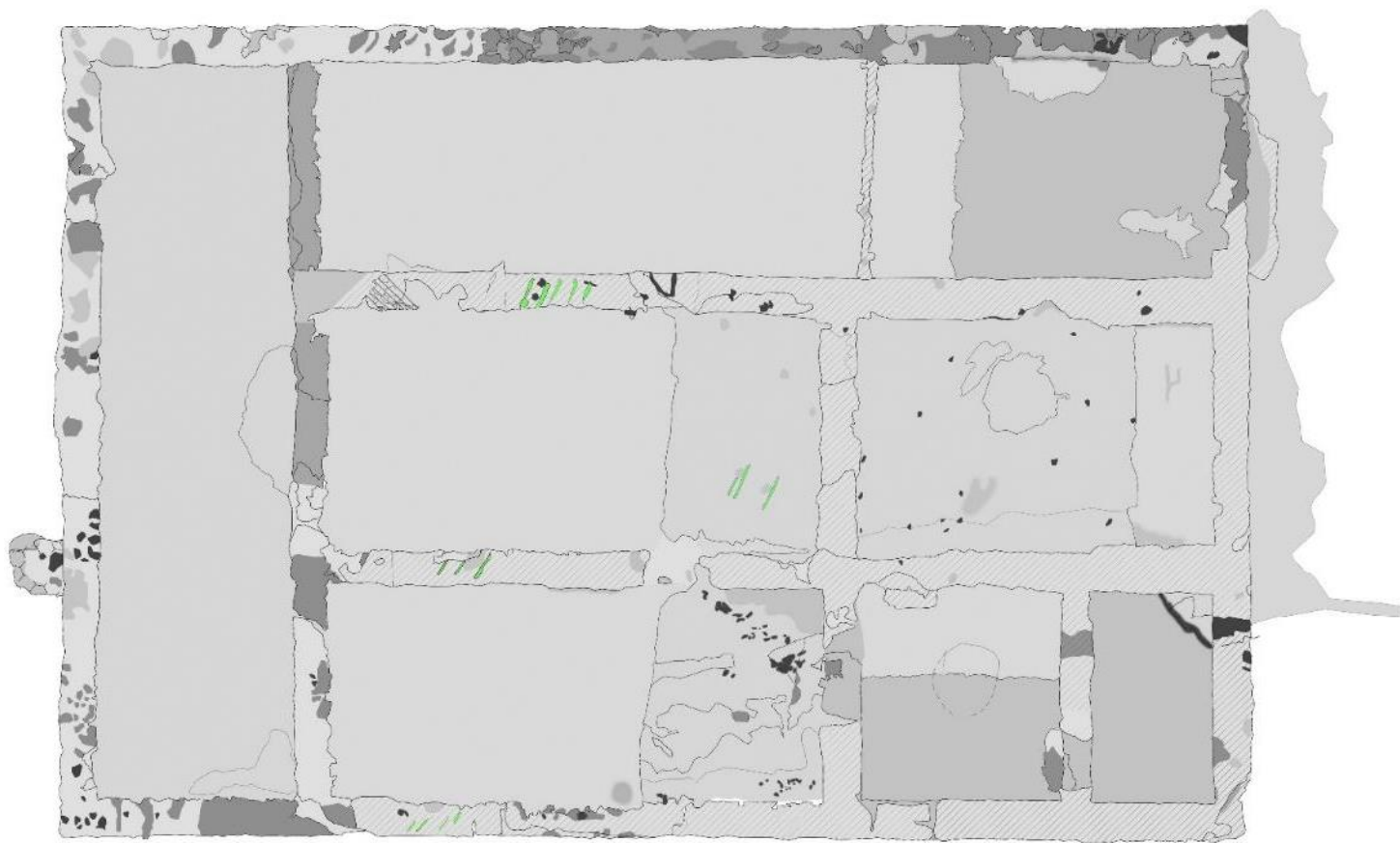


Fig. 52. Plan of archaeological remains of the church at the SBY9 site, marked with green are bulldozing traces

3.3.2. Spatial distribution

Spatial distribution as shown in the chart is consistent with the aforementioned observations made by Elders during excavations. Most of the stucco material, of types 1 and 2 in particular, was concentrated east of the church, on the west-east axis of the building, just by the exterior wall of the chancel (Figs 49–50). Large quantities of stucco material of different types were also found surrounding the north-eastern corner of the church and there is also a noticeable concentration of type 2 pieces inside the building, in its narthex and the north aisle.

3.3.3. General layout of stucco decoration of the church

The spatial distribution of stuccoes as presented in the chart together with archaeological data from excavations allow some conclusions on the original stucco decorative scheme of the building to be drawn.

The first observation to be noted is that the highest number of stucco pieces found at the site is of types 1 and 2, which are both fragments of friezes decorated with vine scrolls. What is of great importance for our investigation is a note by Elders in his article on excavations at the site, saying that: 'Type 1 sections were mostly found face down, type 2 face up.'²⁹² This points to the conclusion that pieces of type 1 were originally decorating exterior walls of the building and when they fell off them they were deposited in the ground in such a way that their decorated surfaces touched the ground and their undecorated surfaces (previously attached to walls) were facing up. Pieces of type 2, as the same observation by Elders convincingly suggests, were decorating interior walls of the building. When they fell off, the reverse happened – they were buried in such a position that their decorated surfaces looked up. These conclusions find confirmation in a close examination of the state of preservation of pieces of both types. It is clearly

²⁹² Elders (2001), 51.

visible that while surfaces of pieces belonging to type 1 are porous, coarse and weather-beaten, fragments of type 2 are smooth and their decoration is much more legible.²⁹³ All these arguments convincingly suggest that indeed friezes of type 1 were located on the external walls of the church, exposed to wind and sandstorms, while friezes of type 2 were laid on its interior walls and were protected from adverse weather conditions. This hypothesis is further confirmed by an analysis of the elevation of pieces (their relative height) found outside the church, east of the chancel wall, ie in the location where fragments of both types are mixed in a relatively small area. It shows that, generally speaking, pieces of type 1 were found at a slightly lower stratigraphic level than fragments of type 2 (Fig. 53).²⁹⁴

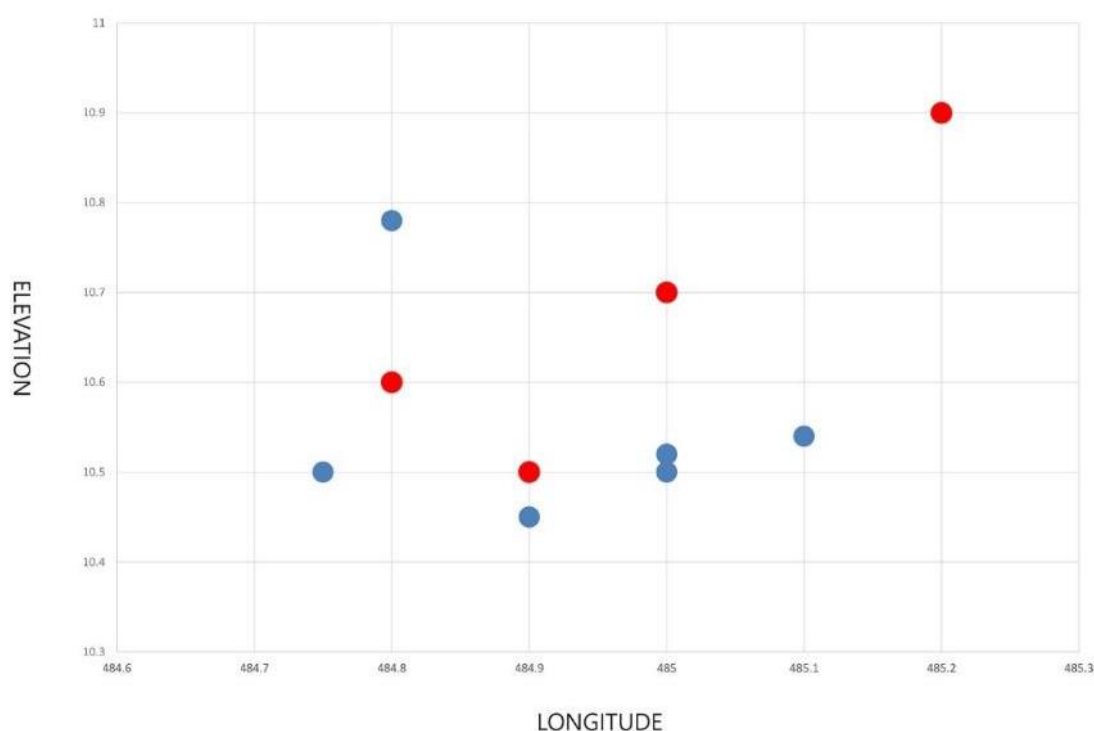


Fig. 53. Elevation of pieces of stuccoes of type 1 (blue) and type 2 (red)

In sum, there are strong and convincing arguments that pieces of type 1 were mounted on the external walls of the building. An analysis of stucco distribution at the site shows, however, that pieces of this type were found also in the central and western parts of the

²⁹³ This difference in state preservation of pieces of type 1 and 2 has been first noted also by Elders (2001), 51.

²⁹⁴ Based on the unpublished Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

church within its walls, inside the building. In order to explain this apparent contradiction one has to think about the way in which the walls of the church collapsed. There is no archaeological evidence that would allow us to reconstruct an original layout of the debris, but it seems at least possible that while walls of the eastern part of the building collapsed outwards, the opposite happened in the western part of the structure.²⁹⁵ Walls of the narthex and parts of the nave collapsed inwards, therefore their external decoration was deposited inside the church debris. In other words, walls within the whole building collapsed eastwards. This theory, however difficult to prove conclusively, can be further supported by the distribution of stucco at the site. There is only one piece of stucco (of type 5) that was found inside the easternmost part of the church – the tripartite sanctuary. At the same time, there is a massive quantity of stucco material that was excavated just north and east of the building, outside its walls. Quite the opposite is the case for the western part of the building. In this part of the church, all pieces of stucco of type 1 were found inside the church. Moreover, none of the fragments of any of the six types were found in direct proximity of the external walls of the north aisle and the narthex.²⁹⁶

3.3.4. Exterior decoration of the building

The conclusion of the above discussion is that external walls of the building were decorated mainly with pieces of type 1. Some more precise questions about the way in which friezes of this type were mounted on these walls should now be raised. The first is: what was the original orientation of type 1 friezes? In other words: which of the friezes, the one with a vine scrolls or the one with stepped motifs, was the top one? In order to answer this question one should determine how the bunches of grapes and palm leaves were orientated as this will indicate orientation of the whole decoration composed of two moulded friezes. Intuitively, one assumes that bunches of grapes were hanging

²⁹⁵ I am grateful to Carlos Cabrera for suggesting this possibility.

²⁹⁶ Exceptions are two fragments of type 1 and 3 which are, technically speaking, located north to the north aisle. They were, however, found so close to the north wall of the chancel that it is possible that they in fact decorated this wall rather than the external wall of the north aisle.

downwards and palm leaves were looking up. This is further supported by a comparison with design of friezes of type 2 where palmettes are indeed looking up and it is reasonable to suppose that in decorations of both types similar motifs of palm leaves and palmettes were oriented in the same way. In other words, on the vine scroll friezes bunches of grapes were hanging downwards and palm leaves were looking up. Consequently, the vine scroll frieze was the lower part of the decoration and the frieze with stepped motifs was the upper one. Such a reconstruction agrees also with an observation based on understanding of technical aspects of the stucco decoration of the church. As it has been already mentioned, friezes of type 1 were most probably produced in such a way that a wooden support was mounted on a wall of the church and filled with wet stucco. Later the stucco projecting above the upper edge of the support was pressed with a wooden mould in order to create a decorative surface. One can easily imagine that it was rather difficult to manipulate with a large wooden board so that edges of the support and the mould could adjoin precisely. Instead, one supposes that the wooden board could have been pressed a little bit too hard and the result was a slightly protruding edge. Such an edge is indeed visible on many of fragments of type 1 stuccoes (Fig. 36). It confirms that the undecorated surface of plain stucco was the lower part of the decoration and its upper part was the frieze with stepped motifs.

The second question that should be answered here is: where exactly were decorations of type 1 placed on external walls of the building? In his aforementioned article Elders has argued that friezes of type 1 were laid around frames of doorways.²⁹⁷ Indeed, there are a few pieces of stucco that may suggest such a link between type 1 stuccoes and doorways. They were found in the narthex, almost exactly on the west-east axis, ie in the location where one could expect the main western doorway to the church and in the north aisle, close to where a side doorway is also probable.²⁹⁸ However, the greatest number of stucco pieces of type 1 was found in a location where the existence of a doorway is not possible, ie in the eastern façade, just by the choir. In order to understand this outstanding concentration of the material at this point one should turn

²⁹⁷ Elders (2001), 51.

²⁹⁸ Based on the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

to an observation that has been noted by King in his article about the Sir Bani Yas: 'A round arched window was also found whose plaster frame was decorated with motifs of the same character as those forming the string courses. The window frame had fallen in sufficiently good condition to be reconstructed nearly in its entirety'.²⁹⁹ It is clear from this quote that in King's opinion the arched window was decorated with stuccoes of type 1. The existence of the window and its exact shape is at the moment difficult to verify as most of the pieces of what King has called a 'plaster frame' are either broken or lost. The only visual proof of this window is an archival photograph preserved by the Abu Dhabi TCA that indeed shows pieces of an arched window frame made of fine, plain plaster put together and, on the top of it, fragments of type 1 decoration (Figs 54–55). Closer examination of the decorated pieces shows, however, that there is no structural relation between the arched frame and the stucco frieze. This is not surprising taking into account that not a single piece of this type with curved edges had been excavated at the site. It would be rather difficult to imagine that a frieze with straight edges could have surrounded an arch and therefore King's interpretation does not find support in the material evidence.



²⁹⁹ King (1997), 228; an arched window has been mentioned also by Elders (2001), 51.



Figs 54–55. Fragments of an arched window and decoration of type 1

Without more excavation data it is very difficult to understand what then was the relationship between the arched window and the frieze. That these two elements were somehow related is rather certain as pieces of both the window and the type 1 frieze were found mixed east to the sanctuary.³⁰⁰ One explanation could be that the frieze was in fact a cornice separating the gable from the gable wall with a window located below. There are many examples of cornices separating the triangle of a gable from the wall below it in northern Mesopotamia and especially two churches of ʿTur ʿAbdin are interesting here: the church of Mar Azaziel at Kefr Zeh and the main church at the monastery complex at Ṣalaḥ. The first one (Fig. 56), dated to around 700³⁰¹, has three windows in its western façade, one in the gable and two below the horizontal cornice, in the gable wall. The triangle of the gable is framed with undecorated cornices, horizontal one of which continues to the side elevations of the building. In Ṣalaḥ (Fig. 57), which was erected probably sometime between the sixth and the ninth century³⁰², there is one window in the gable of the south façade and three more in the gable wall below.

³⁰⁰ Based on the unpublished Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

³⁰¹ Bell and Mango (1982), 120.

³⁰² Bell and Mango (1982), 148–149.

A cornice frames the gable and continues on the side parts of the façade, above doorways. For technological reasons, it would be very difficult to imagine that a moulded frieze could have been mounted diagonally on the gable as wet stucco would inevitably slide down before setting. This is because of the considerable weight of the material and the way it protrudes from the wall.³⁰³

However, a frieze functioning as a cornice mounted parallel to the ground seems to be possible. Although a number of further examples from northern Mesopotamia show that continuous friezes in the function of cornices were popular in a region relatively close to the Gulf and that many of the cornices mounted on the side aisles were decorated, there are no examples from this region for decorated, carved or moulded, gable cornices. Therefore the problem of relationship between the window and the decoration remains open.

³⁰³ Compare with stucco decoration of the eighth century palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar. The almost all-round and heavy sculptures of the so-called athletes in the bath porch were built up by adding lumps of stucco to the surface, which was slightly hollowed to the outline of the figures. This allowed to control the process of setting of the material and prevented it from sliding down. Stucco decoration of the dome of the audience hall was, in turn, created in fragments and later mounted in place. It is evident from how particular fragments of the decoration, which were found on the floor, have clear, straight edges. This indicates that they were intentionally 'prefabricated' elements rather than randomly broken pieces of the decoration. No such edges were found in the case of Sir Bani Yas friezes what confirms that they were moulded directly on walls of the building. There is also no indication that those friezes were created by applying layers of stucco on walls., Hamilton (1931), 104, 118; Hamilton (1959), 190-192, pl. XLIV, LIII-LIV, LVI.



Fig. 56. Gable of the west façade, the church of Mar Azaziel at Kefr Zeh



Fig. 57. South façade of the church of Mar Yakub at Şalah

As has been discussed above, distribution of type 1 stuccoes at the site shows the highest concentration of pieces of this kind in the eastern part of the church. But fragments of type 1 were found all over the site in other locations, mostly in the north

aisle and in the central part of the narthex. This suggests two possibilities: either external walls of the building were somehow decorated with type 1 stuccoes for their entire length or stucco decoration was concentrated in proximity to the entrances to the church, as has been proposed by Elders. Examples from northern Mesopotamia provide convincing evidence that this second possibility is rather more plausible as doorways to church buildings in this region were richly decorated with sculpture³⁰⁴ and continuous friezes decorated with geometric and floral patterns and surrounding a building were not typical. This hypothesis is further supported by the fact that, as it has been discussed above, a certain correlation can be noted between concentration of pieces of type 1 and places where doorways are probable.

It should be excluded, however, that friezes of type 1 formed frames of doorways themselves and it seems more plausible that they were mounted rather above them as a kind of cornice. That the friezes functioned as frames is very unlikely for two reasons. Firstly, for technological reasons that have been explained earlier it would be extremely difficult to mount friezes of this type vertically on the wall. Secondly, the two main surfaces of the decoration of type 1 meet at an angle of approximately 145–150 degrees and it is impossible to imagine how a fragment of decoration of this shape could have been mounted in the place of a doorframe. Quite on the contrary, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that this angle made the friezes, when mounted parallel to the ground, protrude from the surface of the wall, making them perfect cornices above entrances to the building (Fig. 58). This hypothesis can be supported by an example of the southern façade of the baptistery at Nisibis where each of four doorways is crowned with a decorated frieze and an undecorated cornice (Fig. 59).³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 161–166.

³⁰⁵ Keser-Kayaalp and Erdoğan (2013), Fig. 14 a.



Fig. 58. Hypothetical reconstruction of stucco decoration of doorways, computer reconstruction by S. Bogdan



Fig. 59. South façade of the baptistery in Nisibis

Whether pieces of any other type decorated external walls of the building is difficult to establish. Elders mentions that there were double doorways in the north and east walls of the north room and that:

Fragments of a stucco 'plaque' were found opposite both doors at a height of approximately 2-2.5 meters, which indicates that such plaques were mounted over the lintel above both doorways.³⁰⁶

This statement by Elders raises, however, more questions than it solves. Firstly, it is difficult to understand what 'height' Elders meant. Secondly, the spatial distribution based on the catalogue of pieces does not allow us to state conclusively which fragments Elders meant, as pieces of type 2 and 6 were found in the vicinity of both doorways and fragments of type 3 and 4 just slightly further away. It has been already discussed that pieces of type 2 were certainly mounted inside the building and therefore stuccoes of types 3, 4, 5 and 6 should be considered here.

Four pieces of type 3 were found north-east to the building. Their faces are of relatively good condition and they seem to be closer, in terms of state of preservation, to stuccoes of type 2 rather than to those of type 1. This is contradicted by the fact that according to the Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds the biggest fragment of this kind was found face down.³⁰⁷ Taking this into account it is reasonable to suppose that plaques with crosses of this type were mounted externally, above lintels of north doorways to the church and possibly also above an entrance to the north-eastern room. Therefore, it might have been fragments of this type that King was referring to. The hypothesis that plaques with crosses were mounted in direct proximity of doorways can be supported by an example of the church at Jubail where a cross incised in plaster is visible at walls by doorways between the nave and the sanctuary and in a jamb of the southern entrance to the nave.³⁰⁸ Similarly, stucco plaques representing crosses were mounted above

³⁰⁶ Elders (2001), 51.

³⁰⁷ Based on the unpublished Abu Dhabi TCA catalogue of finds.

³⁰⁸ Langfeldt (1994), Figs 2, 4, 6.

doorways in domestic buildings of al-Hira³⁰⁹ and crosses – carved directly on the internal walls of the building or on plaques – were located above doorways between aisles in the church on Kharg island.³¹⁰

At the same time, there are some indications that fragments of type 4 were used inside the church rather than on its external walls. Firstly, their surfaces of very fine stucco are rather smooth and they seem not to have been exposed to weather conditions when still on the walls of the building. Moreover, a close examination of the distribution of stucco at the site shows that while pieces of type 3 were found only north-east of the building, fragments of type 4 were excavated also in its southern part. At the same time, it is certain that the north façade of the church was directed towards the monastery buildings and its eastern façade was located close to the main entrance to the complex. Therefore, a person visiting the monastery must have passed the east and north external walls of the building, in contrast to the south façade which must have been rarely seen by monks and visitors. This would explain why pieces of type 3, mounted externally, were found only north-east to the church. Very different was the situation inside the building, all parts of which were in constant use. If my hypothesis that pieces of type 4 were decorating internal walls of the church, probably above doorways, is correct then this seems to be confirmed by the fact that these were found also in the south-east part of the building.

The state of preservation of pieces type 5 and 6 may suggest that they were originally mounted on external walls of the building. Distribution of these pieces, however, reveals no pattern and nothing more specific concerning these types can be determined at the moment.

³⁰⁹ Al-Ka'bi (2014), 91.

³¹⁰ Ghirshman (1960), 14.

Whether friezes of type 1 and plaques of type 3 were the only stucco decoration of doorways is impossible to determine conclusively. However, King has mentioned that in 1995 a small stone fragment with a cross 'which have fallen from a lintel from the exterior of the east end of the church'³¹¹ was found and therefore it is probable this stucco decoration was complemented by stone plaques.

3.3.5. Interior decoration of the building

As it has been already stated, there is strong evidence that pieces of type 2 were decorating interior walls of the church. This is seemingly contradicted by the fact that not a single piece of this type was found within the outer walls of the building. This, however, is fully explainable by the fact that the north and east walls of the building collapsed outwards, as has been already discussed. No pieces were found in the western part of the site, which indicates that stuccoes of type 2 were located only in the eastern part of the building, probably in the tripartite sanctuary. The exact location of type 2 friezes was discussed by Elders who has supposed that they were mounted on the lower parts of internal walls of the chancel, probably below the arched window.³¹² This seems to be consistent with the picture of the distribution of stucco where, similarly as in the case of pieces of type 1, the highest concentration of pieces is by the sanctuary, on the east-west axis of the church. Elaborate interior decoration of the eastern part of a church, as opposed to the western part of the building, is also known from wider Christian world and an example closest to Sir Bani Yas is the aforementioned church at Jubail (cat. nos 117-118). Also in northern Mesopotamia churches that are roughly contemporary with the Sir Bani Yas church follow this pattern. Decoration of internal walls in those churches executed in stone, mosaics and wall paintings is concentrated in sanctuaries, especially in apses.³¹³

³¹¹ King (1997), 228.

³¹² Elders (2001), 51.

³¹³ Keser-Kayaalp (2009), 176–189.

It has been already concluded that the plaques of type 4 found at the SBY 9 site were most probably mounted internally. A certain concentration of fragments of this type is noted adjacent to the north wall of the north room and there is also one fragment found on the south foundation wall of the south room. Both locations are very close to where doors leading from the side chancel rooms outside the church were most probably installed. This may suggest that plaques of this type were mounted above lintels of these doorways.

It has been mentioned that it is probable that the choir of the church was vaulted. To reconstruct its decoration is virtually impossible at this stage of research. One could mention, however, the aforementioned examples of churches in Ṭur ‘Abdin, whose apses were decorated with monumental stone crosses. It cannot be excluded that similar, aniconic decoration could have existed in a conch of the eastern apse or a semi-dome of the Sir Bani Yas church.

Conclusion

The church on Sir Bani Yas island was a rather humble structure serving a local community of monks on an isolated desert island. Yet its founders and builders took care to decorate it elaborately with stucco friezes and plaques. It has been proved here that by combining analyses of preserved material with archaeological data and comparative examples from other Christian sites of the region it is possible to reach important conclusions concerning the types of stucco used to decorate the church and the way they were located within the space of the church.

The results of this enquiry are not clear and conclusive enough to enable a full and comprehensive reconstruction of the original stucco decorative scheme of the building.

However, as it has been already demonstrated in Chapter 2, isolated and reconstructed types of stucco decorations from Sir Bani Yas can be compared with collections of stuccoes from other church sites in the region. This, in turn, could provide information about the artistic landscape of Christian stucco production in the early Islamic period. They are also of help in establishing a relative chronology of stucco decoration in the region, a topic that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

4. Stucco Decoration of the church A1 of the site of al-Qusur, Failaka island

Stucco fragments excavated at the church site of al-Qusur on Failaka island, Kuwait in 1988 and 1989 have been discussed by a number of scholars who have commented on their stylistic and iconographic origin. So far, however, stuccoes from this site have not been the subject of a comprehensive study and no attempt has been made to understand the stucco decorative programme. A substantial part of the stucco material – especially pieces found in 2007 and later – has never been published and it has not been determined what were the original decorations they belonged to. Also little attention in the scholarship has been dedicated to the place of those stuccoes within the landscape of Christian stucco decoration in the region and their chronological relation to stuccoes from other sites. Therefore, in this chapter I attempt to fill this gap by firstly analyzing the material itself and, secondly, by comparing fragments from al-Qusur with stuccoes from several sites in the Gulf and in southern Mesopotamia. As a result I will propose a hypothetical, simplified reconstruction of the stucco decorative programme of the church and present certain conclusions concerning the dating of al-Qusur stuccoes.

4.1. Geography, overview of the site and the structure of the medieval village

The island of Failaka is located 20 km off shore from Kuwait City, in the north-easternmost part of the Persian Gulf. It is 13.5 km long and its average width is 3.5 km.³¹⁴ The site of al-Qusur is situated in the central part of the island and stretches over an area of 1.8 km north-south and 1 km east-west.³¹⁵ Most of the site comprises

³¹⁴ Kennet (1991), 97.

³¹⁵ Kennet (1991), 97, Fig. 1; Patitucci and Uggeri (1984), 422; Benediková (2010), Fig. 7.

individual houses isolated one from another creating a dispersed settlement pattern. The more densely built-up area of this site, known as the 'Medieval village', is located in the north part of the site.³¹⁶ It is formed by a number of courtyard houses surrounding a square with two churches: a three-aisled building in the very centre of the square (known as church A1) and a single-aisle one to the east (known as church A2, Fig. 60).³¹⁷

The question whether the part of the settlement located in direct proximity of two churches was a monastery remains open to discussion. Recent excavation seasons at al-Qusur were dedicated mostly to addressing this issue and there are now strong arguments supporting the hypothesis that buildings situated next to the churches were serving a local community of monks. The most important of those arguments is provided by a very recent discovery of what is believed to be a refectory.³¹⁸

Two churches of the settlement (Fig. 61) are situated one next to another, axially aligned so that the entrance to the small church (A2) is located just approximately 2 metres from the east wall of the great church (A1).³¹⁹ The great church of al-Qusur (A1) was a three-aisled building 36 m long and 19 m wide. It had a tripartite sanctuary terminated with straight walls and a narrow narthex.³²⁰ Adjoining the south of the sanctuary were two annex rooms. Particular parts of the church, including aisles, were divided one from another by continuous walls and communicated by relatively narrow doorways.³²¹ This feature, as with the straight walls of the eastern part, resembles the architectural structure of churches on Sir Bani Yas island³²² and – especially – of the monastery church on Kharg island and the church at the site of 'Ain Sha'ia.³²³ The second church of

³¹⁶ Benediková (2010), Fig. 7.

³¹⁷ Bonnéric (2014).

³¹⁸ It is beyond the scope of this text to discuss this hypothesis comprehensively. The question whether the complex was indeed a monastery has been recently brought up by Bonnéric (2015 a).

³¹⁹ Salles and Callot (2013), 247, Fig. 5

³²⁰ Bernard and Salles (1991), 9.

³²¹ Salles and Callot (2013), Fig. 5.

³²² See the previous chapter.

³²³ See the section 5.2 External evidence – relative dating: architecture; Steve (2003), plan 12; Okada (1991), 72–74, Fig. 1.

al-Qusur (A2) was a modest structure of a single nave terminated by a rectangular sanctuary. The building was accessible from the west via steps.

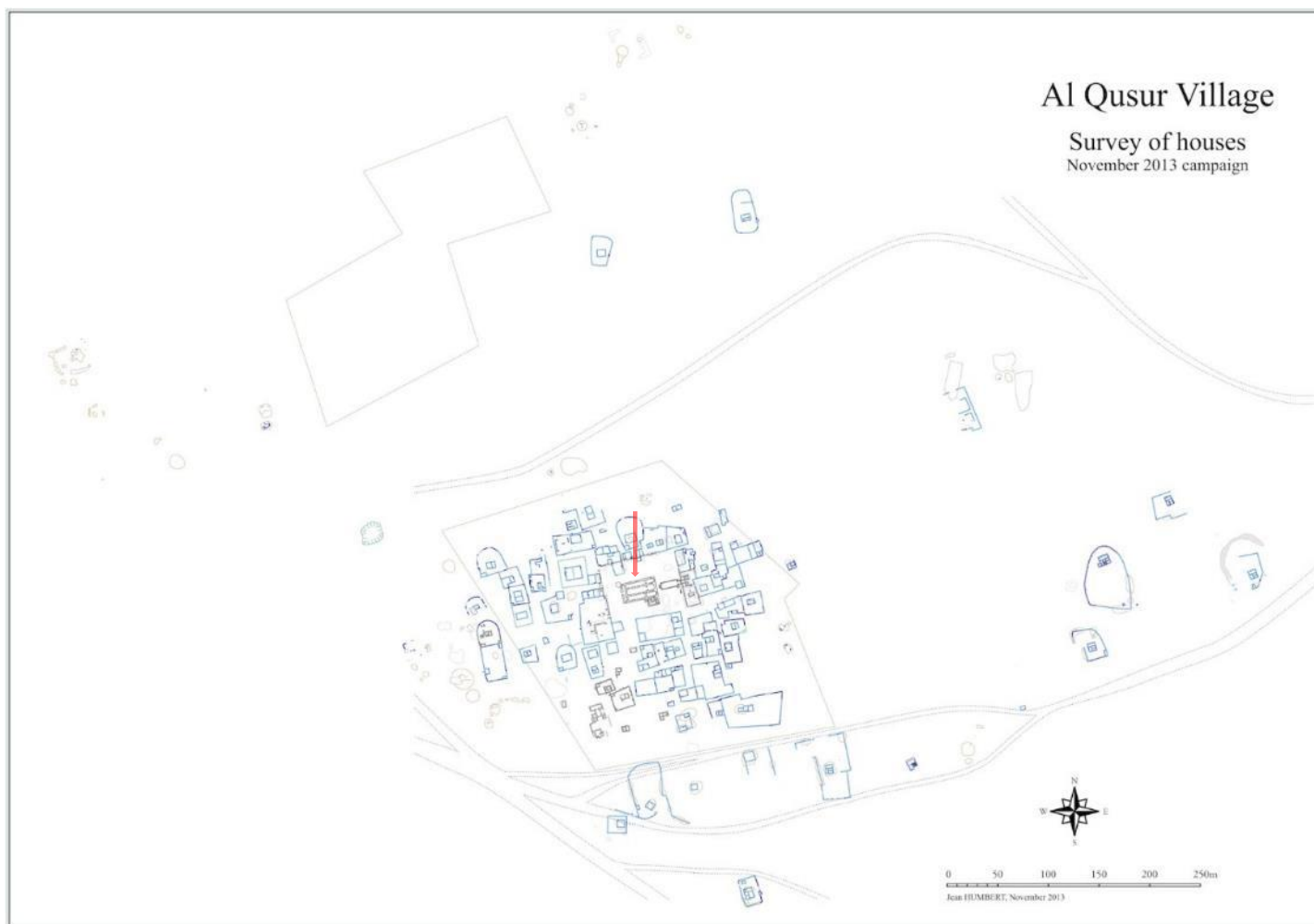


Fig. 60. Village of al-Qusur, marked with an arrow is the church A1

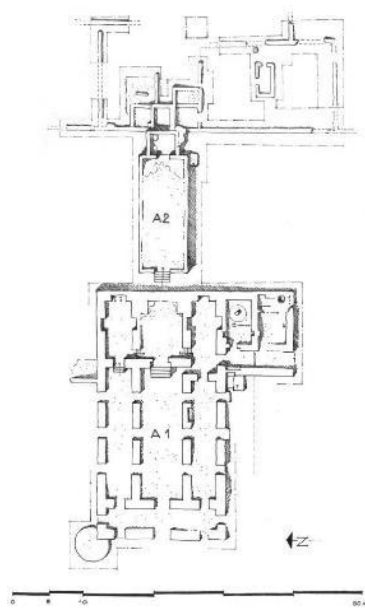


Fig. 61. Plans of churches A1 and A2 at al-Qusur

4.2. History of the finds

The collection of stuccoes from the site of al-Qusur on Failaka island consists of several dozen fragments excavated in years 1988, 1989, 2007 and 2013 by the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka.³²⁴ In 1988 a preliminary sounding was conducted at the site by Jean-François Salles, Vincent Bernard and Olivier Callot. Their discovery of several pieces of what was later identified as a stucco panel in the south-east corner of the south aisle of the church indicated the Christian character of the settlement.³²⁵ In 1989 a regular excavation started at this site and, as a result, further fragments of stucco were found in the southern part of the building, the majority of them in the easternmost part of the south chapel, by the eastern wall of the room.³²⁶ In the beginning of the 1990s the plans of the French-Kuwaiti archaeological mission in Failaka were suddenly

³²⁴ For the history of excavations at the site see Bonnéric (2015 b).

³²⁵ Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 155; Bernard and Salles (1991), 7–9.

³²⁶ See below for further details.

interrupted by the breakout of the Gulf War.³²⁷ Archaeologists were only able to come back to the island in 2007. During that season more than 20 pieces of both decorated stucco and architectural plaster were found in the south aisle by the westernmost doorway leading to the building and a few more in different locations within the southern part of the church.³²⁸ Another fragment of decorated stucco was found in 2013 in the north-south trench located north of the church A1, approximately 10 m from the north wall of the north chapel of the building. The fragment was found among scattered fragments of plaster which were deposited most probably from destruction of the church.³²⁹ One further fragment decorated with crossing lines was found in 2014 also in a secondary location, in a pile of rubble at the site.³³⁰

No fragments of decorative stucco were found at the smaller church (A2). The only pieces of stucco known from the site of al-Qusur beside the main church (A1) come from a courtyard house located in the northern part of the settlement.³³¹

4.3. Overview of the collection of stuccoes from al-Qusur

As has been already mentioned, stuccoes were excavated at the church site of al-Qusur in 1988, 1989 2007 and 2013. One further fragment was found in 2014 in a pile of soil and rubble from excavations (Fig. 72). Panels excavated in 1988 and 1998 are preserved in a private collection of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah and in the Kuwait National Museum in Kuwait City respectively. Detached pieces that can be associated with those panels and with the one reconstructed by Bernard are also kept in the Kuwait National Museum.

³²⁷ Salles (2011), 294.

³²⁸ Based on archival documentation the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka.

³²⁹ Rivoal (2013), 12; archival documentation of the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka; for the distribution of stucco at the site see Figs 72–73.

³³⁰ Based on archival documentation of the French-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission in Failaka and personal communication with Julie Bonnéric.

³³¹ Benediková (2010), 34.

Fragments excavated in 2007 and those found in 2013 and 2014 are at the moment stored in the Archaeological Centre on Failaka Island.

In order to present the material in a systematic manner stuccoes from the site will be introduced in a chronological order, ie according to the sequence in which were excavated in consecutive years of archaeological seasons at the site.

1988

During the preliminary sounding in 1988 a substantial number of pieces was found by Vincent Bernard in the south-east corner of the south aisle.³³² The number of identified fragments induced the excavators to assemble them into a panel (no KM 7496, cat. no. 52), which reflected the composition that these stuccoes had originally formed.³³³ Unfortunately, just a few years later the panel was hugely affected during the Gulf War when many fragments were destroyed and – as a result – the panel nowadays lacks a substantial number of fragments. The design of the complete panel is therefore known only from a drawing published by the excavators in 1991 (Fig. 62).³³⁴

At the moment the 1988 panel is displayed in the Dar al-Athar museum in Kuwait City (a loan of the Kuwait National Museum). It measures approximately 96.5 x 59 cm and

³³²Based on the archival documentation of the excavations in 1988. Note that there is certain inconsistency in published reports regarding the precise location of these pieces. While the French article published in 1991 mentions that the panel 'provient de l'angle nord-est du collateral sud', an article published in English in the same year says that the cross was found in the 'south-eastern corner of the room'. However, archival excavation documentation confirms the information published in the French article; Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 155; Bernard and Salles (1991), 9.

³³³ Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), Fig. 15.

³³⁴ The comparison of the panel as it is preserved at the moment with the drawing published by Bernard, Callot and Salles reveals that at certain point stucco fragments were composed in a slightly different manner than it is suggested by the drawing. As a result, certain fragments of the panel are located in different places than they are in the drawing.

shows a cross, the arms of which are terminated with knobs and supported by a triangle base. Its lower part is enclosed symmetrically by decorative bands and its upper part by stylized floral motifs. This central representation is framed by borders decorated richly with geometric and floral patterns, which include an 'almond and diamond' motif, rosettes and herringbone.

Even though the panel was greatly destroyed during the war, it is almost certain that not all of its missing fragments are entirely lost. It seems that at least some of them can be found among a collection of 22 detached fragments of decorative stucco, which are preserved in the Kuwait National Museum under the number of KM 7498 (cat. nos 69–88). Many of those pieces are clearly blackened by fire and two of them are glued to a fragment of a beige background. Similar backgrounds served as supports for the reconstructed 1988 panel and also for the one excavated in 1989. Thirteen of these pieces are visible on an inventory card of the Kuwait National Museum, which states that they are 'Fragments of the Stucco Cross of Church' but it does not give any indication on to which cross panel they originally belonged. One of fragments marked with the KM 7498 number which seems to fit the composition of the 1988 panel is decorated with an 'almond and diamond' motif and most probably comes from a decorative band framing the cross (KM 7498-1, cat. no. 69). Poor state of preservation of the panel makes it difficult to associate securely any other of the KM 7498 fragments with the original design of the panel but it is plausible that at least some of those pieces had indeed formed the 1988 composition. This was, however, certainly not the case of all KM 7498 fragments. Some of them clearly do not fit the design of this panel and belonged to another decoration.

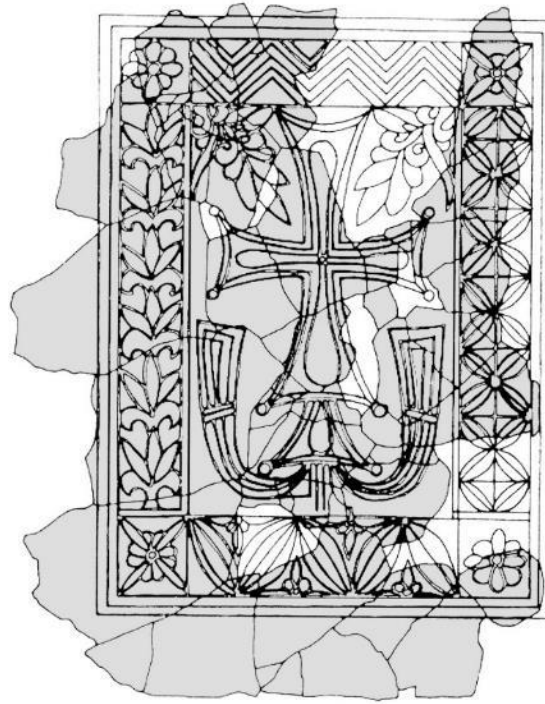


Fig. 62. Reconstruction of a stucco panel no KM 7496, marked with grey are pieces excavated in 1988, marked with white are fragments reconstructed by the excavators

1989

In 1989 pieces of stucco were found by Vincent Bernard in two different locations within the southern part of the church. Most of them were excavated in the easternmost part of the building, just by the eastern wall terminating the south chapel.³³⁵ They were, as with the fragments found in 1988, assembled into a panel³³⁶, which is now kept in the Kuwait National Museum in Kuwait City (no KM 7497, cat. no. 51, Fig. 63). As in the case of the 1988 composition, substantial parts of this panel were destroyed during the 1990-1991 war: some of its parts were affected by fire and a few pieces were detached from the panel.

³³⁵ Bernard, Callot and Salles (1991), 155; archival documentation of the excavations in 1989.

³³⁶ Bernard, Callot and Salles (1991), Fig. 17.

At least one of those detached fragments can be firmly identified with a piece from the aforementioned collection of fragments marked with the number of KM 7498. It shows of an ending of a beam of a cross with a knob and fits perfectly in shape and size one of the lacking fragments of the panel (cat. no. 71, Fig. 64).



Fig. 63. Stucco panel from al-Qusur, no KM 7497



Fig. 64. Fragment KM 7498-3 showed as fitting the 1989 panel

The composition of the 1989 panel is similar to the one excavated in 1988, although it was considerably larger – 115 x 88 cm. In the centre represented is a cross standing on a stepped base with arms terminated with knobs. Between these arms floral motifs similar to palm leaves are visible and the lower part of the cross is framed by a decorative band. This central field is framed by decorative borders filled with scrolls on the sides and with floral motifs enclosed in rhombus fields at the top and the bottom of the panel.

In the same year (1989) four further fragments of plaster or stucco were found on the wall dividing the south and the main aisles, on the top of what was identified as a tomb niche. It seems that the pieces were found within a destruction layer and therefore it is difficult to determine if originally there was any structural relation between the tomb and the stuccoes.³³⁷ It is also not clear whether the pieces were decorated.³³⁸

³³⁷ This possibility has been, it should be noted, suggested by the excavators of the church, Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 162.

³³⁸ Based on the archival documentation of the excavations in 1989.

The article published in 1991 by the French excavators mentioned that beside the pieces composing the two aforementioned panels, some other detached fragments were found at the church, some of them decorated with 'grape vine'.³³⁹ No details of these fragments were published but in archival excavation notes by Vincent Bernard there is a schematic reconstruction of a third panel comprising fragments of an arm of a cross, a vine scroll with grapes, and a fragment of a decorative band framing the cross (Fig. 65). It seems, therefore, that excavators of those detached fragments assumed that at least some of them could have originally composed a third panel. It is also clear from the article published in 1991 that they supposed that the rest of those fragments (ie those that did not fit the third panel) could have formed a separate decoration in the form of a frieze.³⁴⁰ Unfortunately, no further details concerning those pieces are known. It is thus not clear if those fragments were found in any of the aforementioned locations or in a different locus within the south aisle or south chapel.³⁴¹

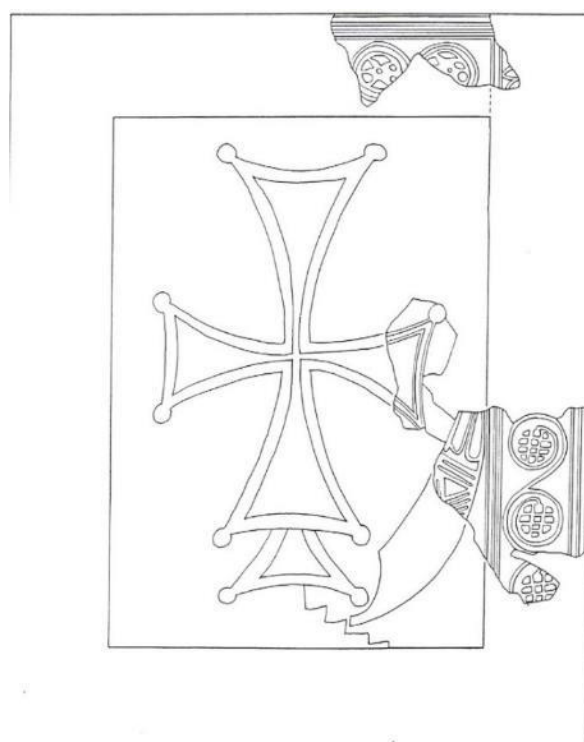


Fig. 65. Schematic drawing of a stucco panel excavated in 1989

³³⁹ Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 161–162.

³⁴⁰ Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 161–162.

³⁴¹ Bernard, Callot and Salles, (1991), 161–162.

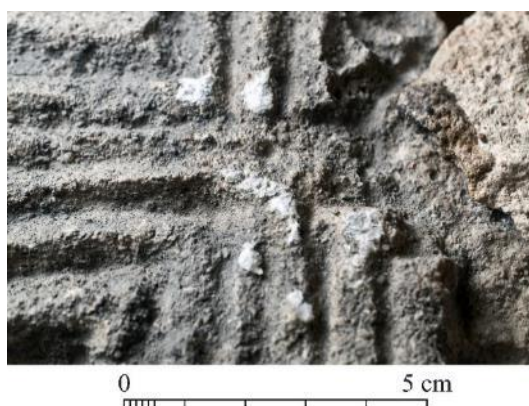
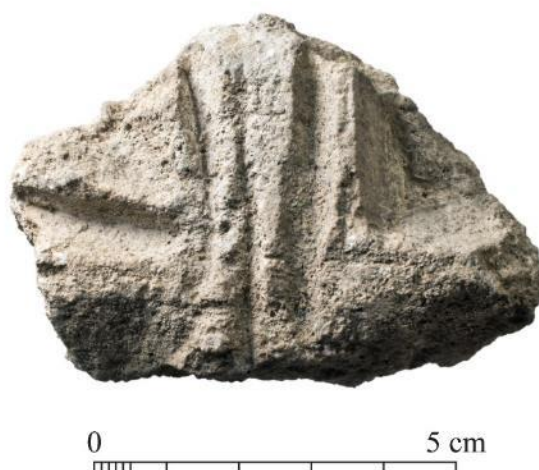
The existence of the third panel seems to be confirmed by some of the detached pieces of stucco from the aforementioned KM 7498 collection. Among them are two joining stuccoes decorated with what seems to be 'grape vines' mentioned in the 1991 article (cat. nos 20–21, Fig. 66).



Fig. 66. Joining fragments from the KM 7498 collection

Among the collection of pieces marked with the inventory number of KM 7498 there are fragments that neither can be associated with any of the two reconstructed panels (1988 and 1989) nor were included in the schematic reconstruction of the third cross by Bernard. Among those pieces there are two fragments representing a stepped base of a cross (cat. nos 72 and 82) neither of which fit in size either of the two panels. Two

further pieces decorated with 'almond and diamond' motifs (cat. nos 84 and 85) also cannot be associated with any of the two panels (1988 and 1989). There is also one piece (cat. no. 83) which shows parallel lines, and a comparison with a central part of a cross of the 1988 panel convinces us that it functioned within a composition in a similar way but of a smaller size (Figs 67–68).



Figs 67–68. Comparison between the fragment from the KM 7498 collection and a part of the 1988 cross

Both fragments of stepped bases and of the central part of the cross are, therefore, similar to designs of other crosses but clearly did not come from those compositions (1988, 1989) and are much smaller. Other fragments that cannot be linked with any of the two panels include pieces decorated with parallel lines, specific interpretation of which is difficult. Whether all these pieces originally composed yet another design

(a fourth panel?) or they come from the same one that was drawn by Bernard (but were not included in his drawing) is difficult to determine. Certainly, however, there were originally at least three panels decorating the southern part of the al-Qusur church.

2007

Fragments excavated in 2007 by the south-west doorway of the south aisle can be divided into three categories: pieces decorated with floral and geometric motifs, fragments of what seems to be architectural frames of windows and/or doors and pieces of plain plaster that originally could have covered walls of the building. In this part of the chapter each of those categories will be discussed. The majority of fragments excavated in 2007 were found in the above-mentioned location. Two further pieces were found nearby: one in the doorway between the narthex and the south aisle and another one in the westernmost doorway between the south and the main aisle. They were both decorated with simple, parallel lines.

The most common motif in the 2007 collection of decorative pieces is a five-petal palmette. The petal, which is situated on the axis of each of the palmettes is clearly larger than other petals and two lower ones bend downwards. It is visible on four different fragments, although the state of preservation of two of them is rather poor (cat. nos 40–41, 63, 66). One further piece (cat. no. 64) seems to be a fragment of the largest petal of a similar palmette. A similar motif of a seven-petal palmette is represented by one further stucco fragment from the 2007 collection. It shows two identical palmettes one next to another and it is clear that originally it formed a part of a larger frieze composition (cat. no. 65).

Another floral motif known from the 2007 stuccoes is a rosette (cat. no. 54). It is composed of eight petals of equal size and is enclosed – on two sides – with frames comprising two and three parallel lines.

Two of the decorative pieces of the 2007 collection (cat. no. 53) join one another. Each of them is decorated with a stylized foliage motif – a half-palmette – framed at one side with two parallel lines. When joined, one of these palmettes looks upwards and the other one downwards.

Another foliage motif is visible on the fragment (cat. no 56). It shows what seems to be a stem branching at the end and enclosing a protruding, rectangular shape. It is particularly difficult to interpret but resembles an iconographic motif of a foliated cross, which was widely spread in the Christian art of the Middle East.³⁴²

A very particular motif visible on one of the larger fragments of stucco from this collection (cat. no. 55) comprises multiplied parallel lines meeting in the centre and ramifying downwards. A comparison with stucco panels found in 1988 and 1989 allows these lines to be interpreted as the centre of a cross.

Two of the pieces of the 2007 collection are decorated with parallel, linear mouldings and grooves, some of which are slightly bending (cat. nos 59, 67–68). They might have originally composed frames of stucco compositions, possibly panels, but their specific function is impossible to determine.

One of the plaques found in 2007 (cat. no. 58) is very much different from the rest of the fragments as it was decorated with shallow, incised and crossing lines.³⁴³

The question of what was the original design of the stucco decoration composed of fragments excavated in 2007 is difficult to answer. There are certain arguments

³⁴² The motif has been originally termed by David Talbot Rice as a 'leaved cross', Talbot Rice (1950).

³⁴³ A detailed analysis of the decoration of this plaque will be presented later in this text.

suggesting that they formed another stucco panel similar to those identified in 1988 and 1989 (Fig. 69). Firstly, there are a few pieces decorated with parallel lines, which could have composed a frame of such a panel. It can be also easily imagined that the two joining fragments decorated with half palmettes and framed with parallel lines also come from such a border of a panel. The other fragment that could have formed a part of a border is the piece with a rosette. Its composition with parallel lines enclosing the flower is similar to the motifs filling the bottom border of the 1989 panel. In both cases there is no angle of 90 degrees between those lines and therefore shapes in questions are rhombi rather than squares. This indicates that rosettes such as the one found in 2007 filled a border of the panel in a similar way that analogous motifs of the 1989 panel do (Figs 70–71).³⁴⁴



Fig. 69. Proposed reconstruction of the panel composed of the fragments excavated in 2007

³⁴⁴ I am grateful to H      David-Cuny for sharing with me her observations on the shape of this fragment and how it could fit a larger decoration.



Figs 70–71. Comparison of the 2007 rosette and a similar motifs on the 1989 panel

What adds weight to the argument that 2007 fragments could have composed a panel is the aforementioned large piece decorated with ramifying lines (cat. no. 55). The comparison of this piece with 1988 and 1989 panels leaves very little doubt that the 2007 piece indeed shows a centre of a cross and was a focal point of a panel. No further details concerning the design of the 2007 can be determined, with an exception of certain clues regarding its size. Particular decorative motifs of the 2007 collection seem to be smaller than those from the 1989 panel and more similar in size to the ones from the 1988 composition. It is possible, therefore, that if the 2007 pieces indeed composed originally a panel, then it was of similar dimensions that the 1988 panel (ie 96.5 x 59 cm).

There are some fragments of the 2007 collection, namely pieces decorated with palmettes, which seem not to belong to a decoration in the form of a panel or – at least – there is no clear parallels for them in the 1988 and 1989 panels. Certainly the piece decorated with seven-petal palmettes does not fit the design of the panel, as is proved by a different technique that was used for its production (it was rather moulded than carved).³⁴⁵ The probable interpretation of the function of such motifs would be that they composed a horizontal frieze. Another fragment which certainly did not compose a panel is the piece decorated with shallow incisions and it was most probably a part of a portable plaque (cat. no. 58).

2013

Decoration of the piece excavated in 2013 (cat. no. 62) is identical with five-petal palmettes from the 2007 collection. The locus it was found at seems to be a secondary location, outside the church building, and therefore it is difficult to comment on where it was originally mounted.

2014

A small fragment of stucco was found in 2014 in a pile of soil and rubble removed from the church A1 during previous excavation seasons (cat. no. 57). The fragment is decorated with crossing lines that are reminiscent of the herringbone pattern.

³⁴⁵ The question of techniques used for producing these pieces is discussed below.

SEASON OF EXCAVATION	FRAGMENTS EXCAVATED	CATALOGUE NUMBER
1988	panel KM 7496 some of the detached fragments KM 7498	cat. no 51 cat nos 69-88
1989	panel KM 7497 some of the detached fragments KM 7498 four fragments of plaster or stucco ³⁴⁶ fragments of the third panel and a frieze (?) ³⁴⁷	cat. no 52 cat nos 69-88 - -
2007	fragments QSR 07/1002 fragment QSR 7/1003-A fragment QSR 07/1007-A	cat. nos 53-56, 58-61, 63-66 cat. no 67 cat. no 68
2013	fragment QSR 13-A5-17	cat no. 62
2014	fragment QSR 14-H.S./2	cat no. 57

Fig. 72 Stuccoes excavated at al-Qusur in seasons 1988-2014

³⁴⁶ Numbers unknown.

³⁴⁷ Numbers unknown.

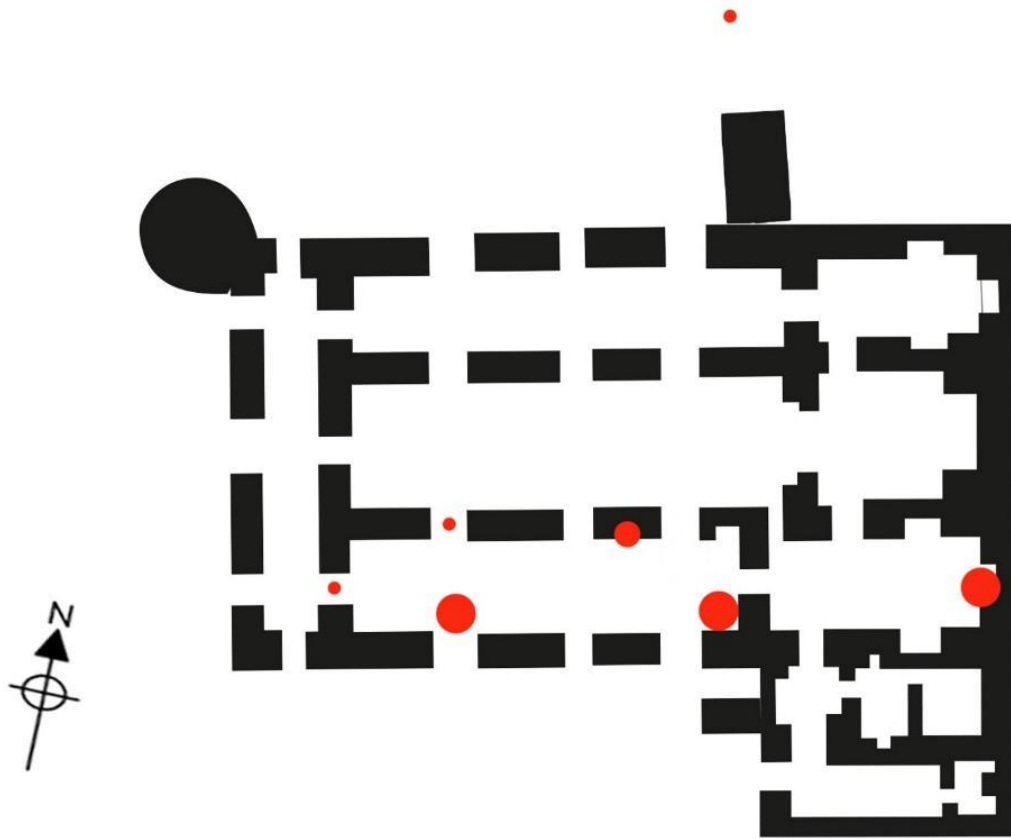


Fig. 73. Locations of stuccoes in the church at al-Qusur. Sizes of dots reflect a number of pieces found at a location³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ I am grateful to Catherine Raad (MAFKF) who kindly helped me to better understand distribution of stucco at the site.

4.4. Technique

The analysis of surfaces of al-Qusur stuccoes reveals that the majority of fragments – and all the pieces that were originally composing panels – were carved. There are certain irregularities noticeable in the way that particular decorations are executed and traces of what looks like marks left by a chisel are visible. Moulding could have been employed in the case of both the seven petal and five petal palmettes. The same design was multiplied on a number of fragments and it seems that the palmettes were secondarily mounted to a plaster background. Yet another technique – incision – was employed to produce the plaque with shallow incised lines.

The only trace of what could have been original painting was visible on a frame of the 1989 panel (Fig. 74).³⁴⁹ The trace of approximately 2 x 5 mm comprised two layers – white lower one and grey one on the top. The latter one shows clear brush marks in a form of very thin lines, which supports the identification of the trace as a remaining fragment of the original polychrome. The white layer should be interpreted as a remnant of whitewash – an undercoat or primer of fine gypsum plaster used for smoothing a surface of stucco.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ I noticed and photographed the trace in 2015 during my study of the panel in the Kuwait National Museum. One year later the trace was no longer visible – it must have been wiped off accidentally in the museum storage.

³⁵⁰ Shaer (2003), 26.

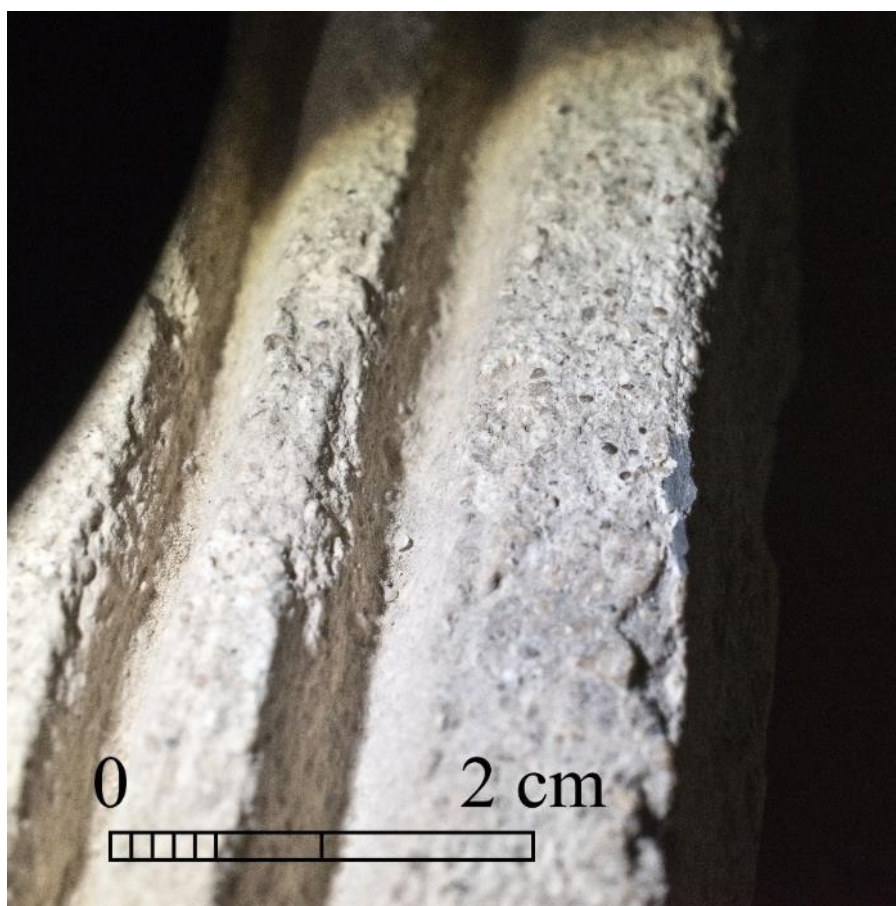


Fig. 74. Trace of paint on the 1989 panel

It is difficult to determine whether similar whitewash was used on any of the 2007 pieces or 1989 detached fragments. In at least a few cases it can be observed that the decorated surface of a stucco is whiter and finer than the rest of the fragment. It may well be, however, a result of polishing a surface of the stucco.

The possibility that stuccoes of al-Qusur were treated with whitewash and then painted is supported by comparative examples. Use of a white preparatory layer on stucco before painting is confirmed in the Antique period in the Middle East by polychrome plaster from Petra.³⁵¹ Whitewash was also being used as a primer on stuccoes in Persia in the Parthian period.³⁵² Many fragments of both painted architectural plaster and painted

³⁵¹ Shaer (2003), 102.

³⁵² Simpson et al. (2012), 210.

decorative stuccoes are preserved from the church at the site of Koke. The traces of colour testified for plaster fragments include blue, yellow, brown, black, and grey and for decorative stuccoes red and blue (the figural relief) as well as yellow (palmettes). On most of them the layer of paint is visible on the top of a preparatory ground of either fine, white gypsum plaster put in a thin layer or whitewash (Fig. 75).³⁵³ The excavator of those fragments has mentioned also that details of the figure's robes as well as parts of ornamental stuccoes were gilded.³⁵⁴ Unfortunately, as Kröger has reported, the gilt 'faded' shortly after the figure was excavated³⁵⁵ and it is indeed not visible at present. The practice of gilding stuccoes was widespread in Sasanian Persia.³⁵⁶ Also other Sasanian stuccoes were often painted with contrasting and rich colours of red orange, purple, ultramarine and black. Kröger has observed that the palette of colours popular in Sasanian stucco decorations was far from 'naturalistic imitation' and the same seems to be true for Christian stuccoes of the region in the early Islamic period.³⁵⁷ Traces of similar deep and vivid colours of red, blue, black and grey are visible on stuccoes from al-Hira (cat. nos 32, 35–36, 49) and 'Ain Sha'ia located in Iraq, which are roughly contemporary with decorations from al-Qusur.³⁵⁸ It is possible that also stuccoes from Sir Bani Yas were painted.³⁵⁹

³⁵³ The fragments are preserved in the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin, where I studied them in 2014.

³⁵⁴ Reuther (1929), 450; Reuther (1930), 12.

³⁵⁵ Kröger (1982), 217.

³⁵⁶ Kröger (1982), 216–218.

³⁵⁷ Kröger (1982), 219.

³⁵⁸ Okada (1989), 38, 58–59; Okada (1990), 105, 107.

³⁵⁹ This possibility has been discussed in Chapter 3.



Fig. 75. Fragment of stucco decoration from Koke

That painted stucco could have been used in decoration of the al-Qusur church is further confirmed by small stucco plaques found at a courtyard house in the northern part of the village by the Kuwaiti-Slovak Archaeological Mission to Failaka in 2009. One of these fragments is decorated with a geometric pattern of an 'almond and diamond', which is very similar to motifs known from the 1988 cross panel. It shows clear remains of red and black paint (Fig. 76).³⁶⁰ One could argue, therefore, that if such stuccoes decorating a village house were painted, then similar motifs employed in the decoration of the church (presumably the most elaborate and the only public building in the village) must have also been painted. It has to be noted, however, that there are also major differences between decorations of the courtyard house and those from the church, mainly in size and quality. Comparing to the stuccoes of the church, the fragments of the residential building are much smaller and made of exceptionally fine, thin stucco. This may suggest that two different workshops were responsible for decorating the church and the villa and it has to be remembered that they might have had different attitudes towards painting of stucco.

³⁶⁰ Benediková (2010), 31, Fig. 12.



Fig. 76. One of the pieces found by the Slovak-Kuwaiti Archaeological Mission on Failaka in 2009

This said, it seems that the aforementioned arguments together with the recent discovery of a paint trace on the 1989 panel suggest that there is at least a strong probability that stuccoes decorating church A1 at al-Qusur were indeed painted. Unfortunately, it is not possible to reconstruct this polychrome in more detail and one can only suggest the variety of colours used here by comparing this material with the aforementioned painted stuccoes from other Christian sites in the region.

Interesting marks in form of thin lines visible on the back of some of the stuccoes from the 2007 set (Figs 77–78) may indicate how stuccoes from al-Qusur might have originally been attached to walls of buildings. Similar marks but composing a much better defined pattern are known from some fragments of painted plaster from Samarra (Fig. 79). As Burgio, Clark and Rosser-Owen have argued, they are imprints of reed mats, which were put on brick walls before the first layer of plaster render was

applied in order to provide an extra grip. Imprints of reed, straw and palm leaves are visible on stuccoes from other Iraqi sites of the Late Antique and the early Islamic period.³⁶¹ Marks visible at the back of al-Qusur stuccoes may indicate a somewhat similar technique but lack of any clear pattern would indicate use of simple dried palm leaves or straw rather than mats. It has been already argued that most of the al-Qusur stuccoes could have originally composed panels and this includes also fragments with imprinted lines visible at the back. It might have been, therefore, that organic material was applied with the plaster preparatory layer – such a composite render would be stronger and more durable than plaster without the additive of organic fibers. Later on – but when the plaster was still wet – a carved panel would be pressed into it and the setting preparatory layer would bind it with the wall.



Fig. 77. Back of the fragment QSR 07/1002 C

³⁶¹ Burgio, Clark, Rosser-Owen (2007), 757; Ignacio Arce has also mentioned certain 'herringbone incisions' visible at walls of Umayyad buildings covered with plaster. He has argued that those incisions were applied onto the first layer of plaster in order to give a better hold to the second, superficial layer of the material; Arce (2007), 508.



Fig. 78. Closer view of the features at the back of the fragment QSR 07/1002 C

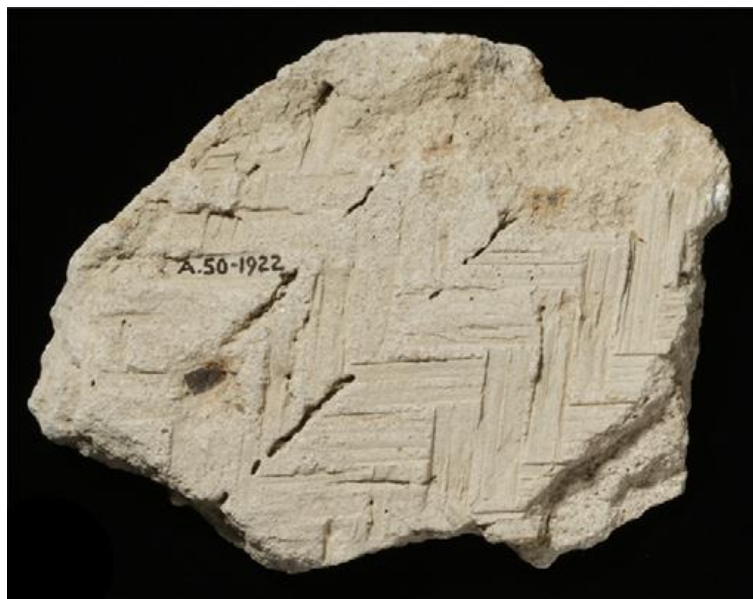


Fig. 79. Back of a stucco fragment from Samarra

4.5. Reconstruction of the stucco decorative programme

All stucco fragments found in the church A1 come from the south chapel and south aisle of the building (Fig. 73). A substantial part of them was found in direct proximity of doorways (fragments found in 2007 and the 1988 panel) and can also be potentially associated with the tomb in the wall of the south aisle. To locate stucco decoration around doorways of the church seems to have been a common practice in the Gulf.³⁶² Much more surprising is the fact that the decoration was present in the southern part of this church only. It is in sharp contrast with, for example, the monastery church on Kharg island where stuccoes were decorating different part of the church.³⁶³ One may associate this fact with the importance of the burial located in the same part of the building, as has been suggested by the French excavators.³⁶⁴

Certainly stucco decoration of the church was mostly based on rectangular panels, each of them representing a cross decorated with floral motifs and framed by borders filled with geometric and floral patterns. As has been already discussed, there were certainly three of those panels, most probably four, and there are some indications of the existence of the fifth one. The biggest one was most probably the one excavated in 1989 and its location suggests that it was mounted on the easternmost wall of the southern chapel. The location of the two other panels can be associated with doorways and they could have been mounted above lintels.³⁶⁵ This is supported by an observation that, as has been already mentioned, the panel of 1988 and – most probably – also the one excavated in fragments in 2007, were considerably smaller than the 1989 one. As such they would fit the space between the lintel and the ceiling.

³⁶² See Chapter 3.

³⁶³ See Chapter 2.

³⁶⁴ Bernard, Callot, Salles (1991), 155.

³⁶⁵ This possibility has been already noted by Salles in regard to the 2007 fragments; Salles (2011), 301.

The decoration comprising a few stucco panels could have been complemented with a separate frieze that could have run parallel to the floor of the south aisle, as is indicated by the existence of the aforementioned fragment excavated in 2007 (cat.no 61). Similar frieze decorations are known from the church site on Sir Bani Yas island (Fig. 58) and the church at Jubail, Saudi Arabia.³⁶⁶

4.6. Dating³⁶⁷

Dating of stuccoes as proposed here will be based on a comparative analysis of certain stylistic features and iconographic motifs of al-Qusur fragments with stucco decorations from other sites in the region. Several attempts have been made in scholarship in order to find comparanda for al-Qusur stuccoes. It has been argued that they are rooted in the Sasanian tradition as well as that there are some similarities between them and the contemporary Umayyad stucco production.³⁶⁸ Often, however, these comparisons have focused on the general similarity of motifs that were widely spread in the Middle East in the Late Antique and Early Islamic period and circulated freely for decades in the vast region from northern Mesopotamia to the Gulf and from Syria to Iran. For this reason, while interesting for tracing artistic relations that Christians of Failaka had maintained with other communities in the region, they are of little help for establishing a more precise dating. Therefore in the following text I will focus on those designs which can be recognized as 'diagnostic'. As such I mean decorations in which a specific iconographic detail or details is combined with a particular technique of production, or designs where such a detail forms a part of a very characteristic, 'codified' composition. In other words, the very existence of a particular motif is not enough for our purpose here and what is required is a combination of certain characteristics (an iconographic motif, technique, composition), the existence of which cannot be seen as random or generic. By isolating those diagnostic stuccoes and comparing them with similar pieces coming from different

³⁶⁶ See Chapters 2 and 3.

³⁶⁷ This section of the chapter has been included in my forthcoming article, Lic (2017).

³⁶⁸ Bernard, Callot, Salles (1991), 161–162; Carter (2013), 24–26.

parts of the region I attempt to draw certain conclusions concerning dating of al-Qusur stuccoes.

A very specific combination of motifs joined in one composition has been employed by the designer of the 1989 panel. These are two triangular, stepped motifs located in the lower corners of the inner field of the panel and double ledges visible at both lower parts of the arch (Figs 81–82). Exactly the same combination of those specific motifs can be found on the plaque from the church site on Sir Bani Yas island (Fig. 80), reconstruction of which has been discussed in the previous chapter. It is very unlikely that such co-occurrence of two motifs, which do not belong to a popular vocabulary of patterns circulating in the region, is coincidental. In order to understand the relationship between the inner field of the al-Qusur panel and the Sir Bani Yas plaque one has to analyse the way in which those motifs function within the compositions in which were employed. There is no doubt that the artisan of the Sir Bani Yas plaque carefully planned its design. There is a strong structural, 'architectural' link between all elements of the composition: the arch, double ledges, parallel lines and stepped motifs.³⁶⁹ Double ledges serve, therefore, as transitional elements between the arch and vertical supports and the latter ones sit firmly on stepped bases. As a result, one can understand this design as a schematic representation of architecture with vertical lines imitating pillars. The impression given by the design of the al-Qusur panel is quite different. Double ledges are not structurally linked here with stepped triangles and parallel lines (ie 'pillars') run slightly aside. In other words: a piece of architecture constructed after this design would inevitably collapse and it is clear that behind this composition stands neither observation of the real world nor laws of architecture and building construction. This suggests that the designer of the panel did not invent this inner composition himself but – much more likely – used another piece of art as a template and then framed it with a decorative border. It seems fairly safe to conclude, therefore, that a plaque of the Sir Bani Yas type 3, identical with the one reconstructed in the previous chapter, was an original and the inner field of the al-Qusur panel was a copy. As has been already argued,

³⁶⁹ For the reconstruction and more detailed description of this composition see Chapter 2.

there are reasons to believe that plaques of this type were produced in larger quantities. With ecclesiastical and trade relations established in the region it would not be surprising to see this plaque – a portable object of a relatively small size – travelling from Sir Bani Yas to Failaka, where it served a local artist.

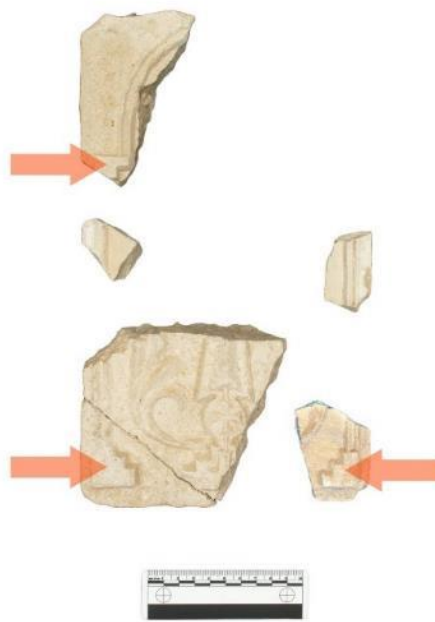
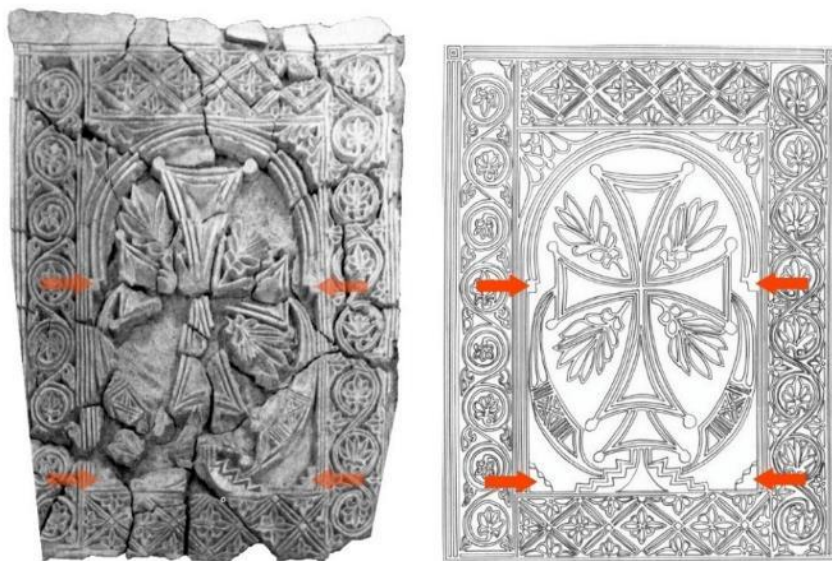


Fig. 80. Stucco plaque from a church on Sir Bani Yas island, marked with arrows are stepped bases and a double ledge.



Figs 81–82. Stucco panel from the monastery site on Failaka island, and a drawing reconstruction of the same panel, marked with arrows are stepped bases and double ledges.

Such an interpretation of the relationship between two stucco decorations implies that the 1989 al-Qusur panel was produced later than the Sir Bani Yas plaque.

Another very specific similarity can be noted between a motif of a cross as represented on al-Qusur panels and on stucco plaques from two other Christian sites: 'Akkaz and Kharg island (cat. nos 50, 89).³⁷⁰ In all three cases arms of a cross are terminated with knobs and the body of a cross is filled with parallel lines, which meet in its centre and ramify towards ends of arms. A close look into the way these lines are rendered reveals also another specific feature in all three cases: ends of both inner horizontal and vertical lines are of loop-like shape. Such characteristics are very peculiar and it is highly unlikely that they appear on stuccoes of these Christian sites just by coincidence.

The third specific combination of motifs to be discussed here is visible on a fragment of an incised plaque excavated in 2007 (cat. no. 58). It is decorated with double lines running horizontally and vertically, which cross at angle of 90 degrees and create a rectangular field. On the top of the vertical double lines there is a hardly visible geometric shape, which can be identified as a triangle. Although the fragmentary state of reservation prevents any conclusive interpretation of this motif of the plaque, the double crossing lines are very similar to lines composing a frame of a cross on a plaque found recently at al-Hira (cat. no. 49) and another one excavated at the site of Bazyan in Iraqi Kurdistan (Fig. 8). Moreover, at the latter one a cross is supported by a simple, triangular base and there are further examples of this motif preserved on stucco plaques from al-Hira (cat. nos 38–39). The triangle shape visible on our al-Qusur plaque could, therefore, be interpreted as a base of a cross. Irrespective of this potential interpretation, it should be noted that the similarity between the Bazyan plaque, the 2015 al-Hira plaque, and the fragment from al-Qusur is evident not only in the double horizontal and vertical lines but also because in all cases the same technique of incision was employed. One could argue that this kind of coincidence might indicate that all these plaques are roughly contemporaneous. Further similarity of certain elements (arms of crosses decorated with roundels, technique of incision, use of paint) is noticeable between the

³⁷⁰ Similarities between stucco crosses from al-Qusur and Kharg have been already noticed and discussed by Claire Hardy-Guilbert and by Jean-François Salles; Hardy-Guilbert (2003), 130; Salles (2011), 301–302.

2015 al-Hira plaque and other fragments found at two churches of al-Hira in 1931 and preserved in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford³⁷¹ as well as similar pieces excavated at the church site of 'Ain Sha'ia in Iraq.³⁷² It is probable that also these plaques were produced all in the same period.³⁷³

There is no evidence that would allow a dating of the archaeological context of the plaque from Bazyan. Stucco decorations of al-Hira's church buildings belong to phases dated roughly to the eighth century by the excavator of the site David Talbot Rice, but the basis for such dating is obscure.³⁷⁴ The earliest radiocarbon date for the church at 'Ain Sha'ia, as calibrated by Carter, indicates a period between the first part of the seventh century and the second part of the tenth century.³⁷⁵ Two later dates are even less informative.³⁷⁶ According to Carter, the ceramic assemblage from this site includes Samarra Horizon wares. This indicates that the site was occupied up to the early ninth century.³⁷⁷

To summarize, the precise and certain dating of churches of Bazyan, al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia is impossible. The tentative evidence presented above, however, allows to suppose that they may fit with the possible eighth century date suggested earlier for the site of al-Qusur.

³⁷¹ Talbot Rice (1934), Fig. 24.

³⁷² Okada (1990), 107–109.

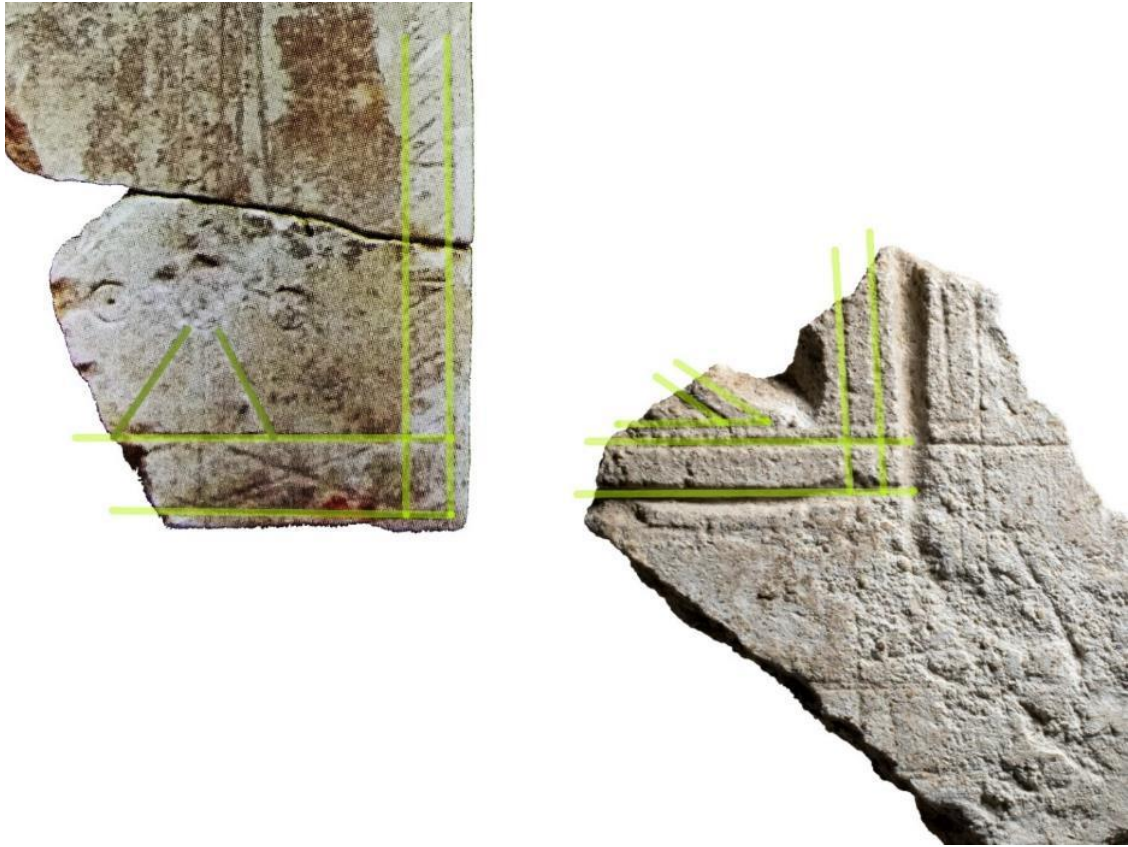
³⁷³ It is interesting to note here that it was roughly in the same period (eighth century) and region that Islamic steatite vessels decorated elaborately with incisions, including multiplied circles, became popular. It would be unjustified to see this popularity as an argument for the eighth century date of the plaques in question but it is possible indeed that the technique of incision became popular in this period in both the Islamic and the Christian contexts, Hallett (1990), 32, 65; Walmsley (2007), 68.

³⁷⁴ Talbot Rice (1934), 57, Fig. 24.

³⁷⁵ Fujii et al. (1989), 61; Carter (2008), 98, n. 18.

³⁷⁶ Fujii et al. (1989), 61.

³⁷⁷ Carter (2008), 98, n. 19.



Figs 83–84. Comparison of the al-Qusur plaque and the Bazyan plaque. Marked with red lines are crossing double lined and a triangle base of a cross

It is an equally complicated issue to establish a probable *ante quem* date for al-Qusur stuccoes but there are some indications that it should be fixed at the first quarter of the ninth century. This is because it may be supposed that if stuccoes of al-Qusur were produced later in the ninth century or in the tenth century, then they should demonstrate certain affinity with Samarra styles, at least in approach to composition and in technical details. This would be especially expected taking into account close trade and artistic ties between Mesopotamia/Iraq and the northern Gulf. Furthermore, Samarra styles – initially developed in the context of Islamic art in the ninth century³⁷⁸ – had profound impact on Christian stucco production of the period. For example, stuccoes in the Christian monastery of Deir al-Suryani in Egyptian Wadi al-Natrun adapted Samarran style in the late ninth–tenth centuries, possibly in the first quarter of the tenth century.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ Immerzeel (2009), 250–251.

³⁷⁹ Immerzeel (2009), 254–257.

This 'Samarra horizon' of stucco production creates therefore an important but provisional date *ante quem*.

4.7. Attribution

Iconography, style and technical features of al-Qusur stuccoes are very homogenous and distinctive from Christian stuccoes of other sites. This is especially true for stucco panels, which display obvious similarities in composition, style and technique and for which no parallels are known from other sites. It is most probable, therefore, that they were produced locally and probably by one workshop. Such production was certainly feasible as there is good evidence of the production of plaster (which in composition does not differ from stucco) for covering walls and floors at al-Qusur. There must have been, therefore, potentially good access to both the material and technology required also for stucco production.

As it will be discussed in Chapter 5, stuccoes from al-Qusur reveal certain similarities to Umayyad stucco decorations from Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.³⁸⁰ This may indicate that the artists involved in the decoration of the al-Qusur church might have got in contact with workshops working in more central lands of the Umayyad Caliphate, possibly in Syro-Palestine. Still, however, the uniqueness of the decorative programme the iconographic repertoire does not give one a reason to suppose that the workshop working at the site came from the Levant.

As it has been already mentioned, the majority of stucco decorations of al-Qusur are of homogenous character. This was, however, not necessarily the case for certain fragments: the incised plaque, which was probably imported from southern

³⁸⁰ See also section 7.2.

Mesopotamia, and moulded palmettes (especially the seven-petals ones), that could have been produced locally but by a different workshop or at slightly different time.

Conclusion

The rich and varied collection of stuccoes from al-Qusur is among the most important ones for studying Christian stucco production in the region of the Persian Gulf. The above study shows that while the artisans decorating the church of al-Qusur were not isolated from the wider artistic world of the southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, they developed their distinctive style and their own vocabulary of motifs. Furthermore, by using a specific method of decorating the building with large stucco panels mounted on walls they achieved a very special aesthetic effect not comparable with stucco decorative programmes known from other sites in the region.

My attempt to establish at least an approximate date for al-Qusur stuccoes illustrates a number of problems related to the chronology of stucco production in the region. In the next chapter I shall investigate those problems in more detail.

5. Chronology of stucco production in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf

In the scholarship on Arabian and Iraqi Christianity, stucco has been regarded as material which is virtually useless in establishing the chronology of development of Christian art in the region. Two quotes from renowned scholars in the field illustrate this approach. In 1991 Bernard and Salles in their first publication on the newly discovered church on Failaka island stated: 'un tel décor ne peut fournir ni indication chronologique ni chemin de progression des influences'³⁸¹ and more than twenty years later a similar opinion was expressed by Carter:

The plasterwork in the churches and monasteries of the Gulf (...) has parallels both in Sasanian and Islamic contexts, and on the current stage of knowledge it is of doubtful utility in diagnosing the date of the sites'.³⁸²

There is no doubt that stucco is indeed challenging material for dating: techniques and motifs were immune to rapid changes and persisted in the region for decades. Moreover, there are very few sites for which assemblages comprising more than a few pieces are known. However, as I have attempted to show elsewhere³⁸³, it is possible to propose – on the basis of the formal analysis of those fragments – a relative sequence of Christian stucco production in the region. Its convergence with the absolute dating of Christian sites in the region proposed by other scholars may serve as supporting evidence for the reliability of the latter. The aim of the following chapter is, however, not to contribute to the dating of Christian sites in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf but to correlate this relative dating of stuccoes with other evidence in order to propose – at least tentatively – the absolute chronology of stuccoes in the region.

³⁸¹ Bernard, Salles (1991), 162.

³⁸² Carter (2013), 326.

³⁸³ Lic (2017); note that substantial sections of this chapter have been included in this article.

Although a reliable method of radiocarbon dating of mortars, plasters and similar materials containing lime has been developed recently³⁸⁴, no such tests have been conducted so far for any stucco fragments from the region. The evidence for absolute dating of stuccoes in question is thus provided either by a comparative analysis with other works of art (for which more precise dating is known) or by other categories of material – such as pottery and written sources.

The first part of this chapter will focus on the study of the similarities between particular assemblages of Christian stuccoes in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, which will provide clues for their relative dating. This will be complemented by examples of similar decorations – executed in stucco as well as other media – from neighbouring regions. They will give certain clues for absolute dating. In the second part of this chapter these relations will be correlated with other relative as well as absolute dates based on external (non-stucco) sources such as ceramics and written evidence.

5.1. Art: internal and external evidence

The starting point for establishing the relative chronology of stucco material in Mesopotamia and the Gulf is the relation between stucco plaques from Sir Bani Yas and the al-Qusur panel, in which a plaque of SBY type 3 served as a model for the panel. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, it indicates that the al-Qusur panel must have been produced later, even if slightly, than the Sir Bani Yas plaques. Of importance here is also the conclusion that the incised plaque from al-Qusur is probably contemporary with similar plaques from Mesopotamia and that some other stuccoes from the Kuwaiti site are comparable with Kharg stuccoes.

The similarity between the stucco material from al-Qusur and Kharg has been noted already by Claire Hardy-Guilbert who – on the basis of the dating of the site of al-Qusur

³⁸⁴ Heinemeier et al. (2010); al-Bashaireh (2013); Boaretto, Poduska (2013); Lichtenberger et al. (2015).

proposed by its excavators and the affinity of those decorations with Sasanian stuccoes – has proposed the sixth to seventh century date for both of those Christian sites.³⁸⁵ The dating as suggested by Bernard and Salles is, however, difficult to accept³⁸⁶ and the similarities with Sasanian decorations of such a general character that they are most probably meaningless for the question of date. One other, alleged link between the al-Qusur and Kharg material and stuccoes produced at a different site has been pointed out by Carter. In his 2013 article the scholar has claimed that the collection of decorations from the site of Tulul al-Ukhaidir ‘provides excellent parallels for the material from Kharg and al-Qusur’.³⁸⁷ He has supported this opinion with a comparison of seven-petalled palmettes from the Gulf sites with a similar motif that – he believes – comes from the site of Tulul al-Ukhaidir.³⁸⁸ In fact, the fragment that he has given in this comparison is a Sasanian fragment from Ctesiphon (Fig. 92)³⁸⁹, which makes his argument invalid.

Despite this clear mistake, Carter’s general observation on the similarity between stuccoes from Tulul al-Ukhaidir and the material from sites of the northern Gulf, especially of al-Qusur, is defensible and provides valuable clues for dating. For example, two half-palmettes decorating one of the pieces from al-Qusur (Fig. 85) are very similar in composition to the two palmettes from a fragment of wall decoration from Tulul al-Ukhaidir (Fig. 86), dated to the Umayyad period³⁹⁰, almost as if they mirrored one another. The affinity of stuccoes from those two sites is evident also in technique. Both decorations from al-Qusur and those from the Iraqi site are characteristic for their deep carving and the dramatic effect given by the play of shadow and light. This resemblance is also expressed in the balance of the convex (light) and concave (shaded) surfaces. Besides, in both cases the overall impression is that particular motifs are divided one from another by very narrow grooves only, which makes the whole composition look cramped, as if too many different shapes were gathered in an insufficient space. Another

³⁸⁵ Hardy-Guilbert (2003), 129-130; Bernard, Salles (1991), 11.

³⁸⁶ See below.

³⁸⁷ Carter (2013), 324.

³⁸⁸ Carter (2013), 324.

³⁸⁹ Finster, Schmidt (1976), Taf. 46 a.

³⁹⁰ See below.

feature shared by stuccoes from both sites is the use of deep, circular hollows in folds of floral elements. All those similarities seem to indicate that stucco decorations from Tulul al-Ukhaidir and al-Qusur were created at roughly the same time. Another Umayyad stucco work, to which al-Qusur stuccoes may be compared are stucco panels from the palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar built by Hisham (r. 724–743) or Walid II (r. 743–744), before he became a caliph.³⁹¹ They are similar to al-Qusur panels in that compositions are rectangular and enclosed with frames decorated with vine scrolls and other floral motifs. What make them comparable is also depth of relief and the abundance of complicated foliate designs limited with geometric frames.³⁹² Especially close similarity is evident between vine scrolls of the al-Qusur 1989 panel (Fig. 88) and a vine scroll of a stucco balustrade panel from the forecourt of the palace (Fig. 89). The shape of petals, the play of shadow and light, and the way the scrolls are composed of two parallel lines are strikingly similar.³⁹³ Another Umayyad site which can be pointed out in the search for comparative material is Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi erected also under Hisham.³⁹⁴ A vine scroll frieze from this site can be characterized in the same way as the aforementioned scrolls from al-Qusur and Khirbat al-Mafjar.³⁹⁵ All those similarities indicate the possible chronological affinity between stuccowork of al-Qusur and decorations of those Umayyad palaces. The Umayyad date of Failaka stuccoes is further confirmed by similarities noticeable between al-Qusur panels, especially the smaller one, and the stucco decoration of the qibla wall of the mosque at al-Fudayn dated to the Umayyad period.³⁹⁶ The feature that they share is that the main field composed of geometric and floral motifs (a cross with ribbons and foliage in the first case and swastikas with rosettes in the latter) is framed with a zigzag border. Similar in both al-Qusur panels and al-Fudayn stucco decorations is also the technique of deep carving and the importance of the play of shadow and light.

³⁹¹ Talgam (2004), 3.

³⁹² Hamilton (1959), 241–267.

³⁹³ Hamilton (1959), pl. LXVI. 2.

³⁹⁴ Talgam (2004), 19.

³⁹⁵ Schlumberger (1986), pl. 65.

³⁹⁶ Labisi (2015), 72–75.



Figs 85–86. Stucco decorations from al-Qusur (left) and Tulul al-Ukhaidir (right)



Fig. 87. Stucco decoration at Tulul al-Ukhaidir (*in situ*)



Fig. 88. Fragment of the KM 7497 panel



Fig. 89. Stucco decoration from Khirbat al-Mafjar

The possible contemporaneity of al-Qusur and Tulul al-Ukhaidir stuccoes discussed above raises the question of whether decorations known from other Mesopotamian sites could also have been produced in roughly the same period. This possibility seems to be supported by the aforementioned example of the stucco plaque decorated with crossing

lines found at the site of al-Qusur, which is reminiscent of stucco plaques from al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia, Nineveh and Bazyan.

As has already been discussed, there are some other similarities noticeable between stucco decorations produced at different sites of Mesopotamia (al-Hira, 'Ain Sha'ia, Qusair and Tulul al-Ukhaidir).³⁹⁷ It is difficult to determine, however, which of them (if any) testify to the contemporaneity of those decorations. In the previous chapter I assumed that in order for the similarity of certain features of stuccoes to be acknowledged as 'diagnostic' a few conditions have to be met. It seems that many similarities among Mesopotamian stuccoes do not meet these requirements and therefore testify rather to the existence of a coherent artistic region than to chronological synchronism. In other words, most of the motifs from Mesopotamian stuccoes are simply generic and their occurrence cannot provide any clues for dating. A good example is the 'almond and diamond' motif. It is known from many Christian stucco and stone decorations from Mesopotamian and the Gulf sites: al-Qusur (cat. nos 51, 69), Tell Tuneinir (Figs 9–10) and al-Hira (cat. no. 25), but also from much earlier Sasanian sites, such as the house in Umm al-Za'atir (Fig. 91)³⁹⁸ and Ma'āriḍ in the region of Ctesiphon (Fig. 92).

³⁹⁷ See Chapter 2.

³⁹⁸ Kröger (1982), Tafel 14.2; Tafel 18.1.



0 10 cm

Fig. 90. Fragment of the panel KM 7496 from al-Qusur

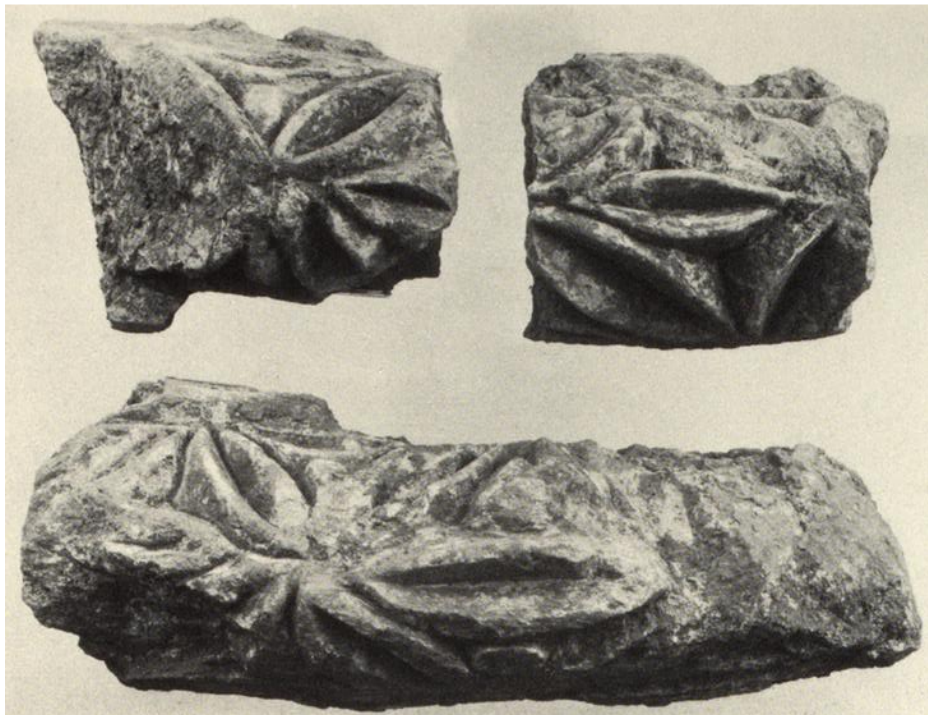


Fig. 91. Stucco fragments from Umm al-Za'âtir



Fig. 92. Stucco from Ctesiphon

In some cases of Mesopotamian stuccoes, however, the similarity seems not to be coincidental. Close affinity that seems to meet the previously determined requirements is evident between Christian stuccoes from al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia. At both of those sites collections of stucco comprise three categories: delicate plaques with carved or moulded decoration, incised plaques and painted plaster.³⁹⁹ The first group is composed of fine pieces which represent crosses with arms terminated with knobs (cat. nos 8–10, 37–38, 44–45). In the second group the design is executed with thin incisions filled with paint and in the third one good quality, architectural plaster is covered with paint of blue, red and other colours. Especially close similarities between stuccoes from al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia are noticeable in classes of incised plaques⁴⁰⁰ representing crosses, where the lower part of a beam is decorated with three circles. The one aligned axially is clearly larger than the two others and all of them are composed of multiplied roundels (cat. nos

³⁹⁹ For the first two groups see the catalogue, for painted plaster from 'Ain Sha'ia see Fuji et al. (1989), pl. 14 b–d; fragments of painted plaster from al-Hira are kept in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and I studied them in April 2015. Some of them come from what was originally paintings of crosses (Fig. 7) and other seem to be fragments of non-figurative, architectural painting decoration.

⁴⁰⁰ Note that one of those plaques from 'Ain Sha'ia is stone, not stucco.

15–16, 36). Because of such an accumulation of similarities in iconography and technique between plaques from al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia, it seems unlikely that decorations from those two sites were produced in different periods. What adds weight to this argument is the fact that sites of al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia are located very close one to another and therefore it is possible that one workshop operated at both of them.

Stuccoes from al-Hira find interesting examples outside southern Mesopotamia. Both incised and carved plaques from this site may be compared with a collection of plaques from the site of Tell Tuneinir in North-Eastern Syria, which has been already discussed in Chapter 2. Most of them are executed in marble and limestone but there are also a few examples of stucco decorations. The similarity between plaques from this site and stuccoes from al-Hira is manifested mainly in compositions featuring a cross under an arch and in crosses decorated with multiplied incised circles (Fig. 13). Stucco and stone plaques from Tell Tuneinir have been only poorly published and their dating is somewhat obscure but it seems that at least some of them can be associated with radiocarbon dates of 651–686 and 654–690.⁴⁰¹

After discussing briefly similarities between stuccoes from different sites which may be relevant to the problem of chronology, it is now necessary to turn to the material which seems to be stylistically and iconographically isolated and reveals very little affinity with decorations from any other site, ie to stuccoes from Koke. The most striking part of church decoration from this site is the almost life-size sculpture in high relief of a man wearing drapery (cat. no. 1).⁴⁰² Also other stuccoes from Koke are easily distinguishable from decorations of previously discussed Mesopotamian sites. Two five-petalled palmettes cut in high relief are of monumental scale and it seems that a row of such motifs composed originally a coherent, closed composition (cat. no. 2). This is in contrast with other stucco decorations in the region where floral patterns are normally subordinate to a wider composition and usually they fill borders and frames, an example of which is the decoration of Tulul al-Ukhaidir. Other stucco fragments from Koke are

⁴⁰¹ Fuller and Fuller (1994), 44.

⁴⁰² For a detailed discussion on this work of art see Chapter 6.

two engaged columns covered with a herringbone pattern and fragments of an archivolt (cat. no 2).⁴⁰³ They give an impression of structural elements rather than purely decorative forms and are therefore incomparable with the delicate stuccowork of al-Hira or 'Ain Sha'ia. Such profound formal differences may indicate that stuccoes from Koke were not produced in the same period as the previously discussed stuccoes from other sites in southern Mesopotamia. What further confirms this supposition is Kröger's observation that the monumental palmettes are similar stylistically to late Sasanian motifs from a house in Ma'āriḍ II.⁴⁰⁴ As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, the Koke relief shows also many similarities with Byzantine miniatures dated to the sixth century. It is interesting that the similar date for the Koke relief (second part of the sixth century) was proposed by the excavator of the site. Reuther did not provide convincing argument for this dating and is only certain that the church was a second structure erected at this site.⁴⁰⁵ The only clue comes from the fact that the figure was found below a floor dated – according to Reuther – to the Islamic period.⁴⁰⁶ Around mid-seventh century would, therefore, be the *terminus ante quem* for the production of the Koke relief. In sum, it seems that the sixth century is a probable date for Koke stuccoes.

It has been stated in the previous chapter that because of the absence of any clear 'Samaritan' features, the *terminus ante quem* for al-Qusur stuccoes is the first quarter of the ninth century. The same may apply, in fact, to Christian stucco production of the whole region, and especially to Mesopotamia. Particularly instructive here is the case of stuccoes from al-Hira, most of which are preserved in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.⁴⁰⁷ The collection of stucco fragments from this site can be divided into two groups: Christian pieces decorated with crosses and non-Christian pieces with floral and geometric motifs. There are profound technological and stylistic differences between those two groups. Christian fragments are relatively small pieces of carved stucco⁴⁰⁸ filled

⁴⁰³ Kröger (1982), 47.

⁴⁰⁴ Kröger (1982), 260; Kröger (2007), p 143.

⁴⁰⁵ Reuther (1929), 450; Reuther (1930), 14–15.

⁴⁰⁶ Reuther (1929), 450; Reuther (1929), 14.

⁴⁰⁷ Four non-Christian fragments from this site are kept in the V&A Museum in London.

⁴⁰⁸ With the exception of two incised stucco plaques.

with decorative patterns rendered delicately in shallow relief. On the contrary, stucco decorations with non-Christian motifs are of much bigger scale (some are even monumental in size), with decoration cut-through and drilled, and characteristic for its play of light and shadow (Figs 93–95). Beside the material itself there is virtually no affinity between those two classes of stuccoes from al-Hira. In fact, the non-Christian fragments are in many aspects similar to Samarra decorations of the so-called 'Style A', which was first isolated by Herzfeld⁴⁰⁹ and later described by Creswell (Figs 96, 98).⁴¹⁰ The typically Samarran characteristics that can be observed in non-Christian decorations of al-Hira are rows of knobs or holes, compositions closed in quatrefoils, honeycomb-like patterns, depth of relief (Herzfeld's 'deep cut style'⁴¹¹), and the importance of the play of shadow and light.



Fig. 93. Stucco fragment from al-Hira

⁴⁰⁹ In Herzfeld's typology of Samarra stuccoes this style is referred to as 'Der Dritte Still'. It is, however, later nomenclature of the same styles proposed by Creswell that is mainly in use in modern scholarship, see Herzfeld (1923), 183–229.

⁴¹⁰ Creswell (1940), p. 286.

⁴¹¹ Tiefschnittstil was characteristic, in Herzfeld's opinion, for the Second and the Third Style of Samarra, see Herzfeld (1923), 6.



Fig. 94. Al-Hira stucco (the Ashmolean Museum)



Fig. 95. Al-Hira stucco (the Ashmolean Museum)



Fig. 96. Samarra stucco decoration of 'Style A'

It is especially interesting to compare one of the vine leaf fragments from al-Hira preserved in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Fig. 97) with a number of Samarra 'Style A' pieces representing the same motif, for example with a fragment preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Fig. 98). The similarity is striking: the same number of leaflets, four drilled holes and three lines starting at the base of each of the leaves and branching into its leaflets characterize both stuccoes. But there are also certain differences between non-Christian decorations from al-Hira and those known as Samarran. Comparing to al-Hira fragments, surfaces of pieces from Samarra seem to be even more flat. Furthermore, there is a whole range of motifs characteristic for Samarra stuccoes of 'Style A', such as tulip-like shapes, which do not occur among al-Hira decorations.⁴¹²

⁴¹² Herzfeld (1923), 196–205.



Figs 97–98. Al-Hira stucco at the Ashmolean Museum (left) and Samarra stucco at the Victoria and Albert Museum (right)

The similarities and differences between non-Christian fragments from al-Hira and Samarra stuccoes were noted by Rice. The scholar interpreted the latter as representative of a 'different line of development' than al-Hira decorations. He also claimed that 'there can be no doubt as to the eighth century date of the work'⁴¹³ from al-Hira and that the numismatic evidence suggests the second half of the century. Beside the coin finds, the eighth century date has been also based on the fact that doorjambs with carved stucco found at al-Hira belonged – according to the excavator – to the last phase of occupation of the site.⁴¹⁴ It has to be remembered that Talbot Rice's report on al-Hira excavations is very brief and evidence for dating that he provided is rather limited, especially in regard to phases of occupation. At the same time, however, there is no reason not to believe

⁴¹³ Talbot Rice (1934), 65.

⁴¹⁴ Talbot Rice (1934), 61–65.

that there was indeed a stratigraphic link between those non-Christian stuccoes and coins dated to the second part of the eighth century.

The comparison of the collection of non-Christian stuccoes from al-Hira and decorations from Samarra gives, in contrast to Talbot Rice's opinion, no indication that Samarra styles represent a 'different line of development'. On the contrary, they – and especially decorations the so-called 'Style A' – should be seen as the next stage in the development of techniques and features that started spreading in Iraq and beyond in the second part of the eighth century.⁴¹⁵ Such an interpretation is supported by a number of stucco fragments from other sites in the region dated to the late eighth century and first years of the ninth century (ie slightly before the emergence of Samarra styles): Ctesiphon in Iraq, Raqqa in Syria (Fig. 100), and al-Alwiya in Saudi Arabia (Fig. 101).⁴¹⁶ They all resemble decorations from al-Hira (Fig. 99) and represent common features such as: panel compositions organized by frames and decorative borders and situated usually at doorjambs, high relief, the sharp contrast between dark background and light foreground, general flatness, and extensive use of strings of drilled holes. Even more striking formal similarity is evident between the aforementioned vine leaf motif from al-Hira and a similar decoration from Madinat al-Far in Syria, dated roughly to the late Umayyad period (Fig. 102)⁴¹⁷. At the same time, comparing to the Samarra fragment from the Victoria and Albert Museum, both Madinat al-Far and al-Hira examples are much more three dimensional with the three lines not incised but protruding from the background. All those examples indicate that the group of late eight-early ninth century stuccoes, including non-Christian decorations from al-Hira, should be seen as a first stage of development of Samarra 'Style A'.

⁴¹⁵ It is interesting that already Creswell wrote about the possible precedents of the vine leaves of the Samarra Style A that: 'It is conceivable that the necessary combination of vine-leaves with four deeply-cut "eyes" and concentric ridges may have evolved in Persia between the end of the Sasanian period and the foundation of Sāmarrā (...)' . He was, however, not able at that time to support this intuition with examples, see Creswell (1940), 286.

⁴¹⁶ Meinecke (1992), 226–231.

⁴¹⁷ Hasse (2007), 443–444, 449.



Fig. 99. Stucco doorjamb decoration from al-Hira



Fig. 100. Stucco doorjamb decoration from Raqqa



Fig. 101. Stucco doorjamb decoration from al-Alwiya



Fig. 102. Stucco fragment from Madinat al-Far

As has been already discussed, the Christian stuccoes of al-Hira are of a very different character to the non-Christian decorations and they present no features characteristic of the Samarran tradition. Assuming that the style of stucco production represented by non-Christian material from al-Hira as well as stuccoes from Raqqa, Ctesiphon, al-Alwiya and Madinat al-Far should be seen as the first stage of development of Samarra 'Style A', it can be said that most of Christian stuccoes of Mesopotamia and the Gulf are characteristic for the absence of this 'Samarra horizon'. The term 'Samarra horizon' refers in the field of Islamic archaeology to Abbasid ceramics of the early ninth century, circulation of which in Mesopotamia and the Gulf forms an important chronological bench mark.⁴¹⁸ The absence of 'Samarra horizon' ceramics at many Christian sites in the Gulf has allowed scholars to date them to before the ninth century.⁴¹⁹ As arguments discussed above have convincingly demonstrated, a parallel situation may be observed in case of stucco decoration. It is especially true for stuccoes of Sir Bani Yas, Mesopotamian sites, 'Akkaz and Kharg. Panels from al-Qusur show a certain affinity (technique of deep relief, play of shadow and light, *horror vacui* impression) with Samarran decorations of 'Style A' and its predecessors but it is of rather general character and may testify to their 'common ancestor' rather than to the fact that they were produced in the same period.

It is difficult, however, to find supporting evidence for this theory in archaeological material. Just as in the case of non-Christian stuccoes from al-Hira, Talbot Rice failed to propose any convincing dating of the two churches at the site and their stucco decoration. He claimed that one of the buildings (of mound V) should be dated to the seventh century but this was based on mere supposition rather than sound evidence.⁴²⁰ In fact there is no reason to believe that there was any substantial chronological difference between non-Christian and Christian stuccoes from al-Hira. The specificity of Christian stuccoes might have been, therefore, a result of a different tradition of stucco production, which thrived among the Christian community of al-Hira in this period.

⁴¹⁸ Northedge and Kennet (1994).

⁴¹⁹ See below.

⁴²⁰ Talbot Rice (1934), 57.

Conclusively, there is little archaeological evidence to support the supposition that Christian and non-Christian stuccoes were produced in different periods. In other words, it is very difficult to draw a firm line between Christian and non-Christian stucco collections from al-Hira that would overlap the differentiation of the pre-Samarran and Samarran tradition. It has also to be remembered that in contrast to ceramics which made their way into many Christian sites in the region in the ninth century, Christian production of stucco seems to vanish at roughly the same time as Samarra styles spread in the Middle East. Until more evidence is available for research the aforementioned theory has thus to remain speculative.

5. 2. Architecture

It has been assumed in this thesis, especially in the chapters about collections from Sir Bani Yas and al-Qusur, that stucco decorations are roughly contemporary with the buildings that they originally decorated. It is reasonable to think that in most cases decorations were created shortly after these buildings were erected. It has to be remembered, however, that many other scenarios could have been possible. A church could have functioned without any decoration for some time after it was built. It could have also been redecorated with new stuccoes decades after it was constructed and the original stuccowork was carved or mounted (an example of which is Tulul al-Ukhaidir). The picture is further complicated by the fact that for some of the sites many phases of occupation are known, probably best illustrated by al-Hira. Nevertheless, to decorate a building with stucco was cheap and easy and it seems that in most cases there was no reason to postpone it. Because of that, whenever there is no clear indication that the decoration is not contemporaneous with the building, it will be assumed that in fact it is. This allows us to include chronological relationships between architecture of particular churches in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf as clues for dating stucco decorations

in the region. In the further part of this chapter some of those relationships will be discussed.⁴²¹

One of the scholars who has been particularly interested in tracing similarities between architecture of church buildings in the region is Yasuyoshi Okada. In one of his articles he conducted a comparative analysis between the churches of al-Qusur, Kharg and 'Ain Sha'ia, all of which have naves divided into three aisles separated by walls and communicated by narrow doorways, tripartite sanctuaries with rooms ending with flat walls, and narrow narthexes (Figs 103–105). Okada's study has been based on measurements of particular architectural spaces of those buildings (such as the narthex, central aisle and choir), which revealed that there are great similarities between the plans of those buildings. For example, the proportion of longer external walls of the nave (the west-east axis) to its shorter walls (the north-south axis) is the same in all churches and has been calculated as 8:5.⁴²² In the conclusion Okada has stated that all those three churches follow one 'architectural concept' and that clear similarities between them suggest their 'chronological contemporaneousness'.⁴²³

This firm statement by Okada has been supported by results presented by other authors. For example, in their article about churches of the Gulf, Salles and Callot have pointed out a number of specific similarities between churches of al-Qusur and of Kharg island, such as the existence of buttresses supporting corners of the buildings.⁴²⁴ Similar opinion on architectural features shared between those buildings has been expressed by Carter who has claimed that churches of al-Qusur and Kharg 'have the same conventional plan'.⁴²⁵ Also Stefan Hauser has commented on the architectural similarities of the churches at 'Ain Sha'ia, Kharg and al-Qusur, which are evident in the existence of

⁴²¹ It would be beyond the scope of this chapter to propose any in-depth study of Christian architecture in Mesopotamia and the Gulf and its relative chronology. The subject has received a lot of scholarly attention and thus what will follow is a brief discussion of results of research that has been conducted by a number of scholars since the early 20th century.

⁴²² Okada (1992), 90.

⁴²³ Okada (1992), 92.

⁴²⁴ Callot and Salles (2013), 250–254.

⁴²⁵ Carter (2008), 75.

the narthex and alleged barrel-vault ceilings in all those structures – and has proposed the same, eighth century date for all three of them.⁴²⁶

Certain less evident similarities have been pointed out between virtually all ecclesiastical buildings preserved in the region: the churches of Sir Bani Yas (Fig. 30), al-Qusur, Kharg, al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia.⁴²⁷ Another church that could be added to this group is the one at 'Akkaz. Although the poor state of preservation of the building remains prevents any conclusive reconstruction of the original plan, the excavators of the site believed that it was similar in plan to churches of al-Qusur, 'Ain Sha'ia and Sir Bani Yas.⁴²⁸ Indeed, the excavated walls indicate that the church had three aisles, access to particular rooms was by narrow doorways and the eastern part was tripartite (Fig. 106).

Even a brief comparison of plans of those churches reveals, however, that similarities between all those buildings are of a rather general character: the division of the nave into three aisles and the existence of full walls between them. As such they cannot add much to considerations of the relative chronology of churches in the region and – as Carter has put it – they testify simply to 'a fairly standardized plan characteristic to the Church of the East'.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁶ Hauser (2007, 102.

⁴²⁷ Carter (2008), 75.

⁴²⁸ Gachet-Bizollon (2011), 135.

⁴²⁹ Carter (2008), 75.

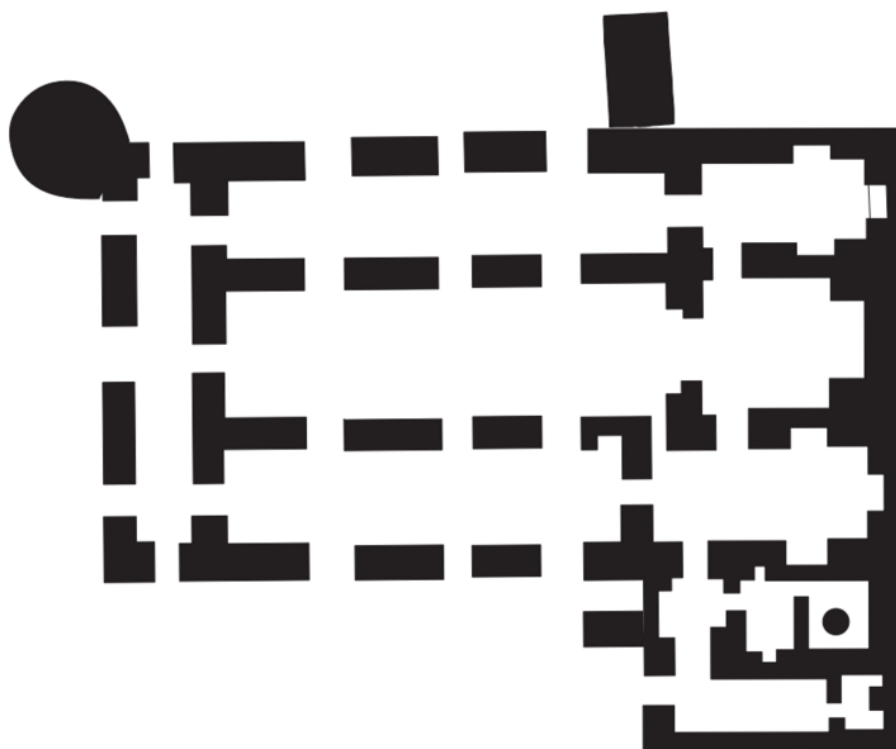


Fig. 103. Plan of the al-Qusur church

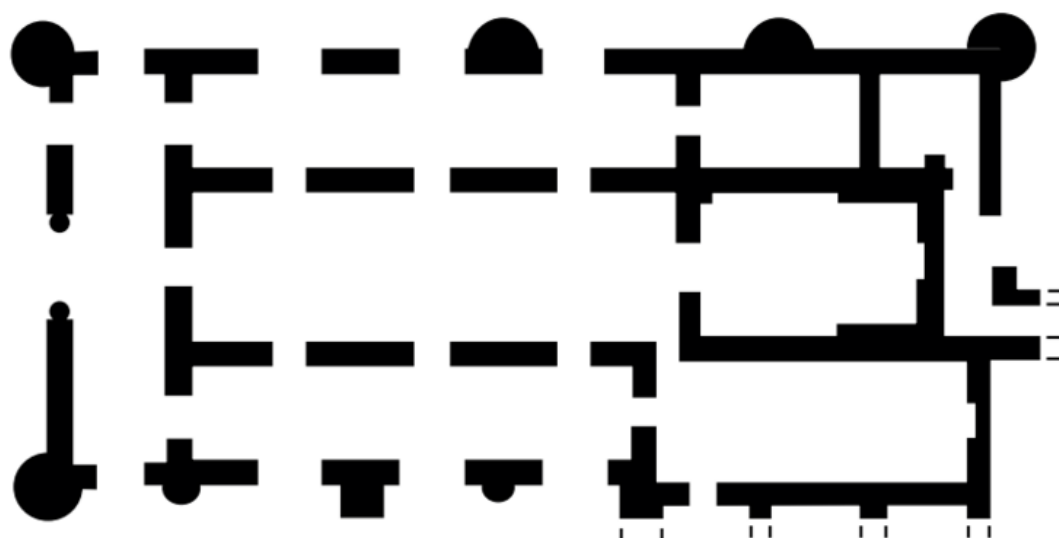


Fig. 104. Plan of the Kharg church

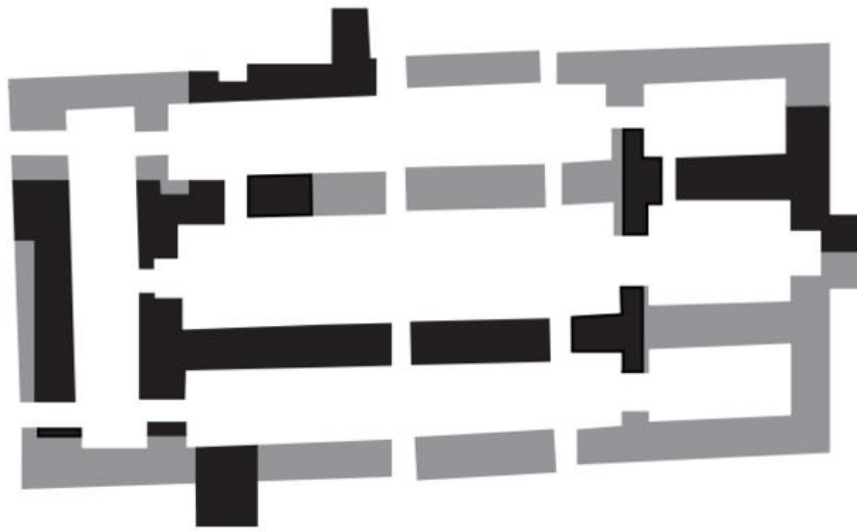


Fig. 105. Plan of the 'Ain Sha'ia church

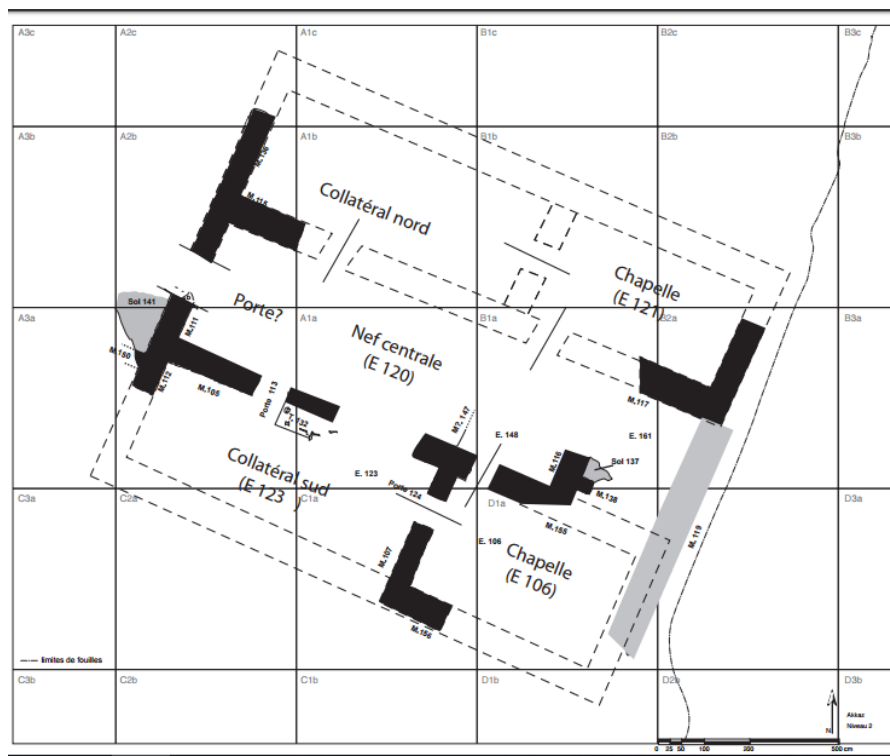


Fig. 106. Plan of the 'Akkaz church

Architectural affinity between the churches of al-Hira and Ctesiphon were noticed in the 1920s and 1930s, when excavations conducted at these sites revealed Christian

structures. In his article about al-Hira Talbot Rice has described two excavated buildings (of mounds V and XI) and commented that:

(...) the German expedition at Ctesiphon found a church which is in plan practically identical. It too was roofed with a brick vault, and its doors, like those of the churches at Hira, were small and narrow and were placed at the sides.⁴³⁰

It is not only the similarity in plans of those churches that is noticeable but also their proportions.⁴³¹ But there are also important differences: church XI at al-Hira is very distinctive for its columns dividing the space of the church into three aisles, a feature that is absent at Koke.⁴³² It is church V that shows more similarities with the Koke structure but also here the affinity is rather general. The space of the Koke church was articulated mainly with massive pillars along longer walls of the single nave. There are no remains of a similar solution in the Hira V church. The supposition that the churches of al-Hira and Ctesiphon could have been built at the same time is further contradicted by the limited stratigraphy and pottery evidence of those sites.⁴³³ This, again, makes one cautious in attributing superficial resemblances of buildings in the region to their contemporaneity.

⁴³⁰ Talbot Rice (1932), 279.

⁴³¹ Hauser (2008), 40.

⁴³² Stefan Hauser has argued that the distinctive church al-Hira XI may represent one of the earliest buildings known from the Sasanian realm and he dated it to the sixth century, Hauser (2008), 42.

⁴³³ There are no pottery finds that could indicate the date of churches at al-Hira but among the ceramics assemblage from the whole site there are no sherds that are certainly Sasanian. As has been already mentioned, the Koke stuccoes were found below a floor dated to the Islamic period which seems to indicate that it belonged to the Sasanian phase of occupation; Reuther (1929), 449–451; Talbot Rice (1934), 65.

5. 3. Written sources

The palace of Tulul al-Ukhaidir is the only building discussed in this thesis for which a reference in written historical sources can be found. As Barbara Finster and Jürgen Schmidt have pointed out, the site can be recognized as Qaṣr Banī Muqātil, which according to the historical record by al-Yaḡut (1179–1229) was built in the mid-sixth century by a Christian Arab, Muqatil ibn Hasan. The moment when the character of the residence changed from Christian to Islamic is uncertain but it must have happened in the second decade of the eighth century at earliest, as it was certainly after the year 710 when two small mosques were erected within the *qasr*. The architectural stucco decoration of the building can be associated with the second (Islamic) phase of occupation exclusively and therefore the year 710 provides a *terminus post quem* for its production. The *terminus ante quem* can be fixed at the year 762 when the nearby Islamic desert castle of al-Ukhaidir started being built and when – according to historical sources – Tulul al-Ukhaidir was destroyed.⁴³⁴ The stucco plaque (cat. no.7) and the plaster niche (cat. no. 6, Fig. 23), both decorated with crosses, belong most probably to the first phase of the occupation of the castle, ie before it was overtaken by a Muslim owner (or the first owner converted to Islam) and therefore can be dated to before the year 710.⁴³⁵ This Christian phase is also confirmed by a Syriac inscription found close to where the stucco plaque with a cross and a cross painted on one of the walls of the building were located.⁴³⁶

Some information on the dating of Christian sites in the region can be obtained from epigraphic sources, although they provide only very general dates. This is well illustrated by examples of epigraphic evidence from the sites of Ain Sha'is and Koke, none of which gives any date or name of an identifiable person. In the case of the first site, 37 fragments

⁴³⁴ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 150; Finster and Schmidt (2005), 346–347.

⁴³⁵ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 150; Finster and Schmidt (2005), 340, 347.

⁴³⁶ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 90, 140–141.

of plaster and one ostrakon inscribed in Syriac were found. Short and fragmentary excerpts of text preserved on many of those fragments transmit Christian content and the script has been identified by Erica Hunter as 'Nestorian'.⁴³⁷ A more detailed reading of the ostrakon has been offered by Sebastian Brock who has identified the text as an excerpt from the *Ḥudra* (a liturgical book of the Church of the East) for the season of Epiphany.⁴³⁸ An ostrakon found at the same church of Koke that the famous relief comes from, now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (Fig. 107), has been studied by the same scholar. It bears six lines of writing in Syriac with references to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and has been interpreted by Hunter as a liturgical text. All those fragments excavated at Christian sites of Mesopotamia have been dated by the scholar to 'circa the seventh century'. However, the author has not presented paleographic arguments supporting this dating, and admitted that the script visible on ostraca (Nestorian Estrangela) was in use up to the late 13th century.⁴³⁹

Similarly general are clues provided by dating of literary sources that – in contrast to those which allow us to understand the building phases of Qaṣr Banī Muqātil – cannot be called historical. One of them is the *History of Mar Yonan*, a hagiographical reflecting life of Christian communities in the Gulf in the early Islamic period. According to Richard Payne, it testifies to the emergence of religious institutions similar to the monastery on Sir Bani Yas island and was written in the seventh or in the early eighth century.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ Hunter (1989), 89–108; Hunter (1996), 68.

⁴³⁸ Brock (2004), 11–13.

⁴³⁹ Hunter (1997), 366.

⁴⁴⁰ Payne (2011).

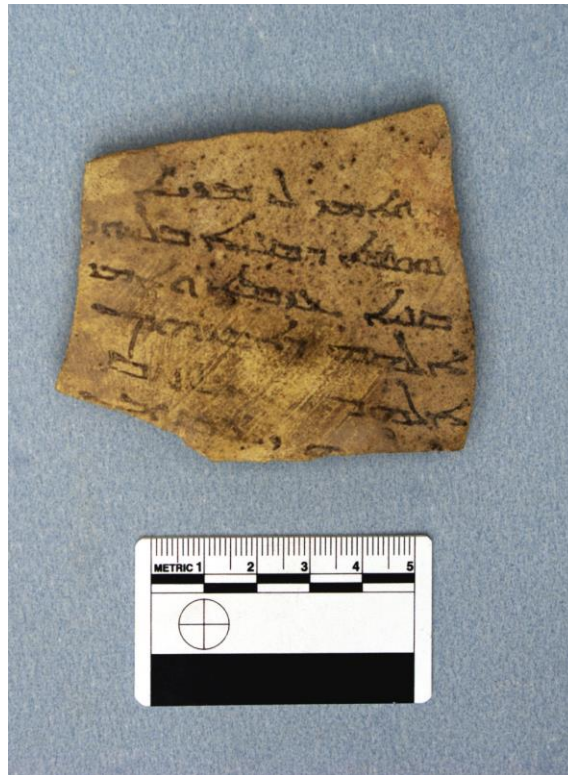


Fig. 107. Ostracon from Koke

5. 4. Radiocarbon dating

Radiocarbon dates are available for three sites in the region only: Sir Bani Yas, al-Qusur and 'Ain Sha'ia. Two samples of charcoal from a fireplace sealed by a collapsed wall were taken from site SBY 9.⁴⁴¹ According to Carter, the samples gave dates of 1460 ± 70 BP which calibrates to AD 420–670 (probability of 93%) and 1305 ± 50 BP, which calibrates to AD 640–830 (probability of 95%).⁴⁴² He has proposed, however, to exclude the earlier date (AD 420–670), as it may be falsely early due to old wood being used at the site. Further, Carter has proposed to correlate the latter of those dates (AD 640–830) with radiocarbon evidence from the site of Kush (Kush II period), which certainly presents an earlier ceramic assemblage and one with a *terminus ante quem* provided by the absence of Samarra Horizon wares. Modelling these data in OxCal 3.10 allowed Carter to

⁴⁴¹ Elders (2001), 56.

⁴⁴² Carter (2008), 90.

conclude that the Christian site of Sir Bani Yas most probably dates (probability of 93.8%) to AD 660–780.⁴⁴³

The only radiocarbon date available for the site of al-Qusur comes from bone fragments retrieved from a tomb located in the south aisle of the church. According to excavators of the site, the samples gave an uncalibrated date of 1665 ± 160 BP, which equals to AD 285 ± 160 .⁴⁴⁴ The calibrated date for 1665 ± 160 BP is AD 20–661 at 95.4% probability⁴⁴⁵, a result which is virtually useless for the question of dating of the site. Moreover, it is not known who the person buried in the church was and it is impossible to establish whether this individual's death can be chronologically linked with the foundation or further use of the church.⁴⁴⁶

Radiocarbon dates have been provided for the site of 'Ain Sha'ia also by samples of charcoal, although results were rather poorly published and are not very informative. Three samples were taken in different parts of the church from the 'lower stratum', the 'main floor' and the 'upper ash layer' and they gave dates of: AD 690, 990 and 840.⁴⁴⁷ It may be supposed that the dates as published by the excavators of the site are those with highest probability but it is not clear from the text of their publication and it may also be that each of them represents a median. The uncertainty regarding dates published by excavators has been noted by Carter who has proposed the calibrated date of the sample from the lowest stratum as 640–970 with 95.4% probability and 660–830 with 61.7% probability.⁴⁴⁸ Both dates the given by the excavators and the results proposed by Carter give a very broad range and are, therefore, not very helpful for the question of chronology.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴³ Carter (2008), 90; Cater (2013), 319.

⁴⁴⁴ Bernard, Callot and Salles (1991), 179, note 44; Salles and Callot (2013), 252, note 33.

⁴⁴⁵ Calibrated by the present author using OxCal 4.2 software, curve IntCal 13; Kennet gives slightly different result: 0–700 AD at 95.4% probability, Kennet (2007), 93.

⁴⁴⁶ Bernard, Callot and Salles (1991), 179, note 44.

⁴⁴⁷ Fuji et al. (1989), 61.

⁴⁴⁸ Carter (2008), 98.

⁴⁴⁹ This has been noted already by the excavators, Fuji et al. (1989), 61.

5. 5. Ceramics

The exhaustive study of ceramics for the Gulf region has been presented by Kennet and Carter and what will follow here is a brief summary of their research on this material and conclusions on dating.⁴⁵⁰

The most important result of research conducted by these two authors is the re-dating of all Christian sites in the region to the early Islamic period. It has been proposed as a response to the theory popular in the older literature on the subject, according to which church buildings in the region should be dated to the late Sasanian period. One of the supporters of this theory is Salles, a member of the first French team excavating the site of al-Qusur, for which he has proposed a 'longue durée' date reaching back to the sixth century. This was based mainly on an analysis of historical sources and a supposition that the main church of al-Qusur could have been preceded by another one at the same site. The scholar failed, however, to produce any archaeological evidence supporting such an interpretation of phases of the structure.⁴⁵¹

Studies by Kennet and Carter have been based mainly on the observation that sherds which were classified in the older literature on the subject as 'Sasanian-Early Islamic' are, in fact, testified for the early Islamic era only. This, together with the fact that other classes of ceramics are unquestionably Islamic, allowed the earlier pre-Islamic dates for those sites to be discarded.⁴⁵² An example is provided by sherds of the so-called 'honeycomb wares' that had been found at sites of al-Qusur and Tulul al-Ukhaidir. While it was thought that this kind of pottery indicates the Sasanian period, it has been argued convincingly by Kennet⁴⁵³ – and later accepted by Carter – that in fact they date to the early Islamic period (the eighth century onwards).⁴⁵⁴ The problem of the so-called

⁴⁵⁰ Older studies on pottery assemblages from Christian sites in the region can be found in:

⁴⁵¹ Salles (2011), 309.

⁴⁵² Carter (2013), 316–322.

⁴⁵³ Kennet (2007), 92.

⁴⁵⁴ Carter (2008), 89.

Sasanian-Islamic wares has been explained also by Kennet in relation to the monastery site on Failaka:

(...) Bernard and Salles claim to have revealed a phase of Sasanian-period occupation in the earliest levels of al-Qusur. The evidence for this consists of an extremely limited area of excavation where no eggshell and two sherds of supposedly "Sasanian-Early Islamic" pottery were found: one glazed bowl and one jar. They cite no supporting evidence for the date of the jar; for the glazed bowl they claim only that its "first occurrence" was in the transitional "Sasano-Early Islamic" period but cite as evidence a parallel from Susa that is from ninth-century levels. All of the very limited ceramic evidence for Sasanian-period activity at al-Qusur and Kharg can therefore be shown to be either wrong or, at best, extremely tenuous.⁴⁵⁵

Examples of undoubtedly Islamic ceramics that allow many Christian sites to be dated to the Umayyad and Abbasid periods are 'turquoise glaze bowls with a carination beneath a slightly flaring rim'⁴⁵⁶ from the Sir Bani Yas monastery, which in fact compose the largest category of pottery at this site.⁴⁵⁷ As Kennet has argued, the same type of turquoise wares is known from the site of Kush (the Ras al-Khaimah emirate, United Arab Emirates) and confirmed for the so-called Kush Period III exclusively, ie to the eighth century. This allows to date the Christian site on Sir Bani Yas island to a similar period.

An important clue for dating Christian sites in the Gulf, as well as in Mesopotamia, is the existence or the absence of Samarra Horizon glazed pottery such as opaque-white glazed wares, lustre – decorated wares and blue-and-white wares (Figs 108–109).⁴⁵⁸ They began to circulate in the very early ninth century (Carter has proposed the year 803⁴⁵⁹) and are a convenient indicator of the *terminus ante quem* for some of the sites (Fig. 110). For example, the absence of Samarra Horizon sherds is certain for Sir Bani Yas and provides a strong argument for dating the site to before the ninth century.⁴⁶⁰ On the

⁴⁵⁵ Kennet (2007), 92; for the ceramic assemblage from Kharg see Hardy-Guilbert and Rougeulle (2003), 131–132.

⁴⁵⁶ Carter (2013), 316.

⁴⁵⁷ Carter (2013), 316; Carter (2008), 82.

⁴⁵⁸ Watson (2014), 123.

⁴⁵⁹ Carter (2008), 90.

⁴⁶⁰ Carter (2008), 89.

contrary, the existence at the site of 'Ain Sha'ia of Samarra-Horizon sherds, such as splashed lead glazed wares, indicates that the site was still occupied in the ninth century.⁴⁶¹ Somewhat more complicated to interpret is the pottery assemblage from the site of al-Qusur. Its main part is parallel to that from Sir Bani Yas, suggesting that both Christian communities were developing at the same time. Possible, though not certain, occurrence at the site of a sherd associated with Samarra Horizon together with the presence of certain characteristic wares such as Eggshell and White Ware may indicate that the occupation of the site was longer than on Sir Bani Yas.⁴⁶² There is very little evidence for any overlap between ceramic assemblages of Sir Bani Yas and Kharg⁴⁶³ and in fact the material from the latter site indicates late eighth-early ninth century date.⁴⁶⁴ Some of the sherds from Kharg overlap, in turn, with those from al-Qusur. However, the firm presence at Kharg of the material associated with the early phase of the Samarra Horizon indicates that the occupation of the site was longer than that of al-Qusur.⁴⁶⁵ Another Gulf site for which an assemblage of ceramics has been studied and published is 'Akkaz. Unfortunately, the precise date of the church layer is difficult to establish as ceramics and glass finds indicate a broad range between the fourth and eighth century. Stratigraphic evidence shows, however, that the church was occupied before the Abbasid period.⁴⁶⁶

Certain, although limited, observations have been made on pottery from Mesopotamian sites. Certain classes of ceramics from Tulul al-Ukhaidir reveal profound similarities with early Islamic pottery from Susa, which allowed the excavators to date the first site to before the middle of the eighth century.⁴⁶⁷ Its Umayyad date has been also confirmed by other ceramics and glass finds from this site.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶¹ Okada, Numoto (1989), 60-61; Carter (2008), 98.

⁴⁶² Carter (2013), 312-322.

⁴⁶³ Carter (2008), 92.

⁴⁶⁴ Carter (2008), 97-98; Carter (2013), 322.

⁴⁶⁵ Carter (2013), 322-323.

⁴⁶⁶ Gachet-Bizollon (2011), 138-139.

⁴⁶⁷ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 113.

⁴⁶⁸ Finster and Schmidt (1976), 150.



Figs 108–109. 'Samarra Horizon' wares

Site	Presence of Samarra Horizon sherds
'Ain Sha'ia	+
'Akkaz	-
Kharg	+
Al-Qusur	?
Sir Bani Yas	-
Tulul al-Ukhaidir	-

Fig. 110. Presence of Samarra Horizon sherds at selected Christian sites of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. "+" indicates presence, "-" indicates absence, "?" indicates that presence is uncertain

Conclusion

By correlating the relative chronology of stuccoes discussed in the first part of this chapter with external clues for absolute dating it is possible to propose a tentative chronology of Christian stucco production in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf.

It has been argued at the beginning of this chapter that a stucco figure and other monumental fragments from Koke are chronologically isolated from other stuccoes in question and that it was most probably produced in the sixth century.

The earliest assemblage of stucco known from the Gulf is this from the island of Sir Bani Yas, which can be dated to the late seventh–early eighth century. It is also most likely that at least one object of this collection – the plaque with a cross under an arch – predates the large stucco panel from al-Qusur but it is impossible to determine what is the time difference between those two works of art. Results of radiocarbon dating and study of ceramics certainly allow the possibility that a part of the stucco production from the Emirati island dates to the earlier period than stuccoes from al-Qusur but it is equally thinkable that both collections are roughly contemporary.

Stuccoes from al-Qusur seem to be roughly contemporary with the non-Christian decoration of Tulul al-Ukhaidir (dated to 710–762) as well as stuccoes of palaces at Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi dated to Hisham. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that panels from the church at al-Qusur date to the reign of this caliph (724–743), or slightly later. The incised plaque from al-Qusur may point to a slightly later phase of artistic activity of this centre, contemporary with Nineveh, Bazyan, al-Hira (Christian decorations) and 'Ain Sha'ia. Two latter sites were certainly artistically active in the same time. It is more difficult to date stuccoes from Qusair but certain similarities (discussed in Chapter 2) between them and plaques from other Mesopotamian sites indicate that they were produced also sometime in the eighth century.

Formal similarities between stuccoes from Kharg and panels from al-Qusur indicate that they were produced in roughly the same period. The study of ceramics also suggests that if there was any time difference between those collections then the stuccoes from Kharg date to the slightly later period. Contemporary with stuccoes from those sites may be also the piece from 'Akkaz but archaeological evidence does not allow to date it to after 750.

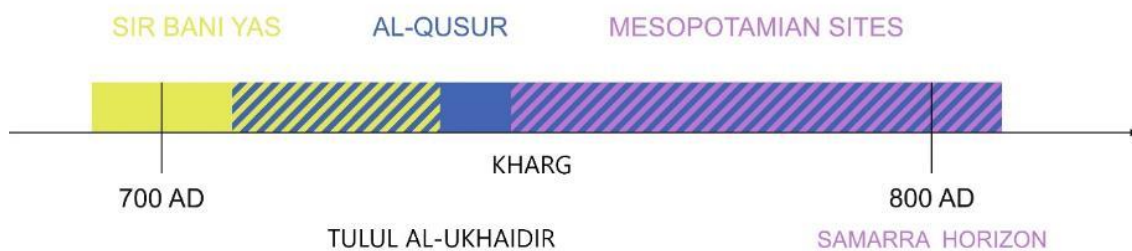


Fig. 111. Timeline of stucco production at selected sites of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf

Very little evidence is available for the date of the Jubail church and stuccoes and the only clue comes from the formal similarity between vine scroll friezes from this site and the Kharg church, which have been discussed in Chapter 2. It is possible, therefore, that Jubail stuccoes belong to this latest phase of development of Christian stuccoes in the region but only archaeological excavations of the site would be able to confirm this hypothesis.

Among all those sites, the two for which there is relatively strong evidence are the sites of Sir Bani Yas and Tulul al-Ukhaidir. Dating of the first one is supported by two radiocarbon dates and the well-studied assemblage of ceramics and the second one by historical sources and also by ceramics. For other sites the evidence is more tentative. What should be underlined here is that stuccoes from particular sites were not necessarily produced all at one time. It seems to be true especially for assemblages that consist of several groups of stucco that differ in technique and other features and the most evident example is the collection from al-Hira. It is easy to imagine that particular types of decorations (such as incised plaques or moulded pieces) were produced by different workshops and at different times. Therefore the dates as given above should

be understood as indicative of the approximate period when a particular centre of stucco production was active rather than the time of production of a single piece.

Site	Absolute dating of sites and stuccoes				Proposed dating of stucco
	Comparative analysis of stuccoes with other works of art	Written sources	Radiocarbon dating	Ceramics	
Koke	6th century	-	-	-	6th century
Sir Bani Yas		7th–early 8th century	660–780	8th century	late 7th–early 8th century
al-Qusur	mid-8th-century–early 9th century			Up to the early 9th century?	8th century
Tulul al-Ukhaidir (Christian decorations)	mid-8th-century	before 710			early 8th century
Ain Sha'ia			660–830	Up to the early 9th century	8th–early 9th century
Kharg				Late 8th–early 9th century	8th–early 9th century

Fig. 112. Absolute dating of selected Christian sites in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf and of stucco decorations from those sites. The last column gives dates of stuccoes as proposed in this chapter, based on both the absolute and the relative dating.

6. Sasanian roots, Classical and Byzantine influences

The focus in this chapter will be on the context in which Christian stucco production evolved. In its first part, characteristic iconographic motifs will be discussed in relation to their Sasanian predecessors and it will be especially the symbolic meaning of those symbols appropriated by Christians that will be analysed. Fewer instances of Classical and Byzantine influences traceable in Christian stuccoes will be discussed in the further part of this chapter. Finally, a section of this chapter will be dedicated to the relief from Koke, which illustrates how both Sasanian traditions and Byzantine influences shaped Christian art of the region.

6.1. Sasanian roots

6.1.1. Ribbons

One of the compositions popular across the region is a cross framed symmetrically by what resemble decorative bands. In the large stucco panel from al-Qusur wide bands, narrowing at each end, rise from a stepped base of a cross and their surfaces are decorated with geometric motifs (Figs 45–46). The existence of similar bands with widening ends on another panel seems to be certain but its precise shape is no more than speculative (Fig. 62). French archaeologists working at the site of al-Qusur have interpreted this motif as a ‘fountain of resurrection’. This, however, has not been supported by any arguments or comparative examples.⁴⁶⁹ The water-related interpretation has been expressed in the scholarly literature also in regard to similar

⁴⁶⁹ Bernard, Callot and Salles (1991), 160–163; Figs 15, 17.

bands with widening ends visible on a stucco plaque found at al-Hira but also in this case such an interpretation remains unjustified.⁴⁷⁰

Very similar to these wide bands pointing upwards from a lower part of a vertical beam known from al-Qusur and al-Hira crosses are those decorating one of the stucco plaques (cat. no. 11) excavated at 'Ain Sha'ia. The central part of this moulded plaque is occupied by a cross with splayed arms, as is visible on a reconstruction proposed by the excavators of the site (Fig. 113).⁴⁷¹ From the lower part of its vertical beam two wide bands rise upwards and frame the cross symmetrically at both sides.⁴⁷² On another moulded plaque (cat. no. 13, Fig. 114) only a fragment of a band is preserved but the example of the previous plaque makes it fairly certain that the band originally rose from a lower part of a cross⁴⁷³ and it was indeed reconstructed as such by Okada (Fig. 115).⁴⁷⁴ On another piece (cat. no. 17), as recorded by the same scholar, is featured a triangular shape, most probably a base of a cross, upon which a ribbon-like shape is visible.⁴⁷⁵ The existence of a corresponding band and a cross in the middle of the composition has, as in the previous case, been reconstructed (Fig. 116) on the basis of a comparison with plaque cat. no. 11.⁴⁷⁶ According Okada the motif visible on plaques from 'Ain Sha'ia should be understood as a modified version of the foliated cross.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷⁰ Al-Ka'bi (2014), 93, Fig. 7; the author has described decorations of three stucco plaques from this site as belonging to the type of 'stream crosses'. It is difficult however, to understand what is the ground for such typological assignment in case of two of those plaques, Al-Ka'bi (2014), 93, Figs 9–10.

⁴⁷¹ Fuji et. al. (1989), 35, 67; Okada (1990), 103.

⁴⁷² Fuji et. al. (1989), pl. 19 b; Okada (1990), 105, 107; Figs 1, 3.

⁴⁷³ Fuji et. al. (1989), Fig. 35.1, pl. 19.c; Okada (1990), Fig. 1.4–2

⁴⁷⁴ Okada (1990), 105–107; Fig. 2.

⁴⁷⁵ Fuji et. al. (1989), Fig. 23.146; Okada (1990), 105, Figs 1, 5.

⁴⁷⁶ Okada (1990), 108.

⁴⁷⁷ Okada (1990), 110; see Chapter 2 for the discussion on crosses decorated with leaves.

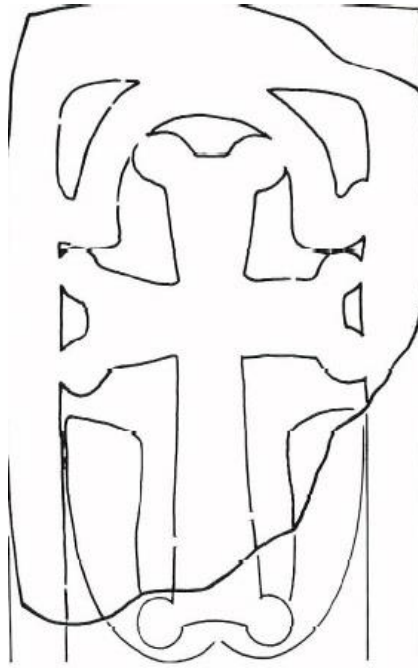


Fig. 113. Stucco plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia, a reconstruction

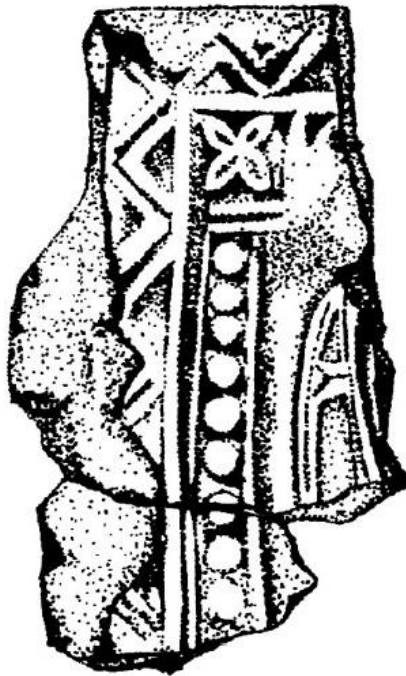


Fig. 114. Stucco plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia

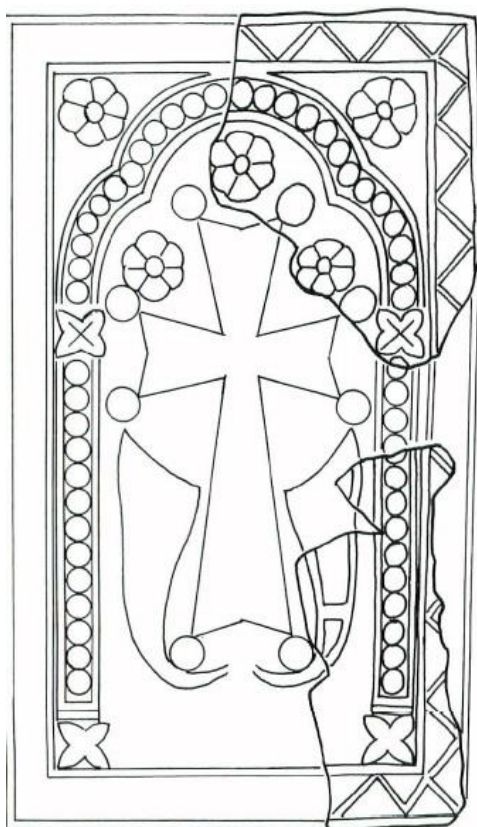


Fig. 115. Stucco plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia, a reconstruction

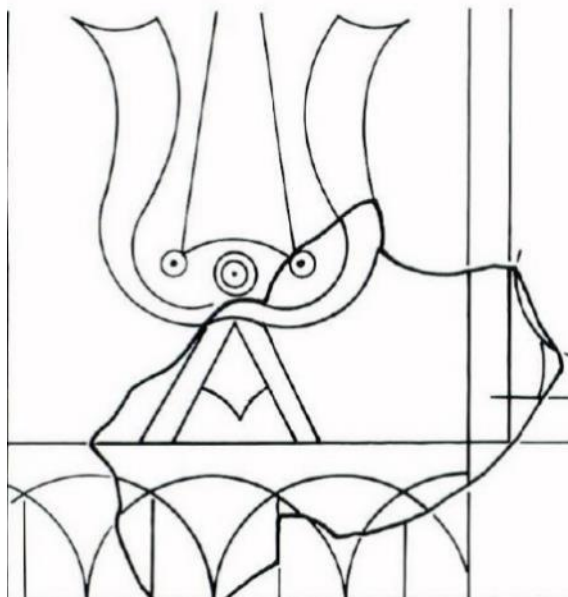


Fig. 116. Stucco plaque from 'Ain Sha'ia, a reconstruction

The precise interpretation of those motifs is, however, difficult and one hesitates whether to call them bands, ribbons or leaves. Closer examination of drawings, photographs and comparative material shows that there is indeed a thin line between a representation of a ribbon and other motifs such as leaves. It is very instructive to compare a drawing of the first piece from 'Ain Sha'ia with the reconstructed stucco plaque from the church site on Sir Bani Yas island (Fig. 44). Clearly, what can be interpreted as a lower fragment of a ribbon has in fact almost exactly the same shape as the lower fragment of what resembles a leaf in the Sir Bani Yas plaque. Such a comparison proves that 'a ribbon' from 'Ain Sha'ia could have been, in fact, a fragment of a leaf. Motifs visible on two other pieces from 'Ain Sha'ia and from al-Qusur are less likely to be leaves but they are of such a stylized and abstract character that it is indeed disputable if they could have been derived from a wavy delicate piece of cloth.

In order to overcome these interpretative difficulties, it is necessary to examine the earlier Christian iconography of the Sasanian period. There are at least a few examples of Christian objects of the pre-Islamic era which prove that a motif of a ribbon was well known to the Christians of Persia. Interestingly, in all of them a ribbon decorates a cross, just as it does in the case of our stucco plaques. The first object is a seal preserved at the Louvre (Fig. 117). It shows a cross under an arch or a niche supported by two columns. To the vertical beam of the cross are attached ribbons placed symmetrically at its two sides.⁴⁷⁸ The ribbons are rather stylized but short, horizontal lines representing folds which are visible especially on the ribbon on the right-hand side of the cross support their identification. This manner of representing ribbons follows Sasanian tradition where similar folds mark what clearly is a ribbon in kingly representations.⁴⁷⁹ Judith Lerner has interpreted this motif as a 'typically Persian adaptation' of a wide-spread image of a cross decorated with leaves.⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, one can easily imagine how two leaves

⁴⁷⁸ Lerner (1977), 7, pl. I.7; Gyselen (1993), 155, pl. XLII. 60.15.

⁴⁷⁹ This will be discussed in more detail in the further part of this text.

⁴⁸⁰ Lerner (1977), 7 Lerner's hypothesis has not been the first to note the relationship between the foliated cross and a cross decorated with other motifs: ribbons or wings. Already in 1950 Talbot Rice

springing symmetrically upwards could have been simply replaced with two floating ribbons in such a composition. It is not only the cross that derives in the common repertoire of forms of the late antique Middle East. Also the very composition comprising a centrally located religious motif enclosed with an arch supported by two columns finds comparanda and a very close one is an oval intaglio representing a Torah shrine – also a religious object – under an arch or in a niche and an engraved name of Yishʿaq bar Ḥanina. It was found in ruins of Ṣafār in Yemen and is dated to the second century AD onwards.⁴⁸¹ It seems that in both the Louvre seal and the intaglio the function of a niche or an arch was to emphasize the sacred character of the enclosed religious object.

In a similar manner, ribbons are represented on copper coins of Yazdgard I (r. 399–420) found in Merv, Khurasan (Figs 118–119). On the obverse, they display the bust of a ruler and on some of them visible is also his name written in Pahlavi. The reverse represents a cross surmounted with a crescent and framed by ribbons.⁴⁸² What is extraordinary about this coin is that a traditional, Sasanian reverse representation of a fire altar was replaced here by a cross⁴⁸³ and that this Christian symbol was combined with an image of a king. Furthermore, the cross itself was juxtaposed with a crescent which – it seems – should be interpreted here as a symbol of the king of kings as the official crown of Yazdgard I represented on obverses of other coins of this ruler was decorated with a crescent of the moon.⁴⁸⁴ It certifies not only, as has been argued by Sergej Loginov and Alexander Nikitin, the spread of Christianity in Persia at that time,⁴⁸⁵ but also the ability of Christian iconography to create new religious motifs legible to both Zoroastrians and

argued reversely: that in the Byzantine composition of a 'leaved cross' – as he calls this motif – leaves 'recall' the Sasanian motif of a pair of wings decorating a central symbol such as a tree of life; Talbot Rice (1950), 80.

⁴⁸¹ Yule et. al. (2007), 536, pl. 37, 5; Yule (2013), 154, Fig. 8.4.2.

⁴⁸² Loginov and Nikitin (1993), 271–272, Figs 11.26, 11.29; note that according to Nikolaus Schindel there are enough well-preserved examples of such coins to be sure that the central motif is indeed a cross, Schindel (2004), 321. It cannot be completely ruled out, however, that what is represented here is a schematized fire altar rather than a cross. Nevertheless, I decided to follow the interpretation that seems to be accepted in scholarship and finds support in the historical circumstances (ie the spread of Christianity in this period). It should be also noted that a fire altar represented in such an extremely schematized manner hardly finds comparanda in the Sasanian coinage. I would like to thank Dr Luke Treadwell for consulting this matter and for his advice to proceed with caution in interpreting the motif on this coin as a cross.

⁴⁸³ This has been first noted by Simpson (2013), 107.

⁴⁸⁴ Shahbazi (2003).

⁴⁸⁵ Loginov and Nikitin (1993), 272.

Christians. To what extent this kind of imagery on coins can be viewed as an expression of favour – or even support – granted by the king of kings to Christians is not certain. It is beyond doubt that Yazdgard I had a tolerant attitude towards Christians and the best evidence for that is the fact that he announced the famous synod of the Church of the East in 410.⁴⁸⁶ Certainly a coin with a representation of a cross, even if issued by local authorities, must have been approved by state officials.⁴⁸⁷ It must be remembered, however, that no coins with similar Christian imagery have been found beside the central Asian city of Merv. It has been argued, for this reason, that the coin with Christian decoration should be understood as a local peculiarity and evidence of a neutral rather than a supportive attitude of the king of kings towards Christianity.⁴⁸⁸ In other words, its revolutionary imagery was neither created or inspired by Ctesiphon authorities nor was it prohibited by the ruling elite of the Sasanian state. It seems that this moderate view on the importance of the Merv coin best explains why such a tradition-breaking iconographic motif appeared in the first half of the fifth century only to disappear and never make its way back into the official Sassanian coinage.



Fig. 117. Seal D 283, the Louvre

⁴⁸⁶ See Chapter 1.

⁴⁸⁷ Puschnigg (2006), 24.

⁴⁸⁸ Schindel (2004), 324.



Fig. 118. Intaglio from Zafār



Fig. 119–120. Coins of Yazdgard I

The third object decorated with a beribboned cross is a Christian seal preserved in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris (Fig. 121).⁴⁸⁹ It shows busts of a man and a woman facing one another with a beribboned cross between them and another, undecorated cross below the couple. Similarly as in the case of the first seal, the wavy fabric of the ribbon is represented by horizontal lines. A Pahlavi inscription visible on the seal reads: '...Nisān, refuge in God'⁴⁹⁰, which strengthens an interpretation of the seal as a Christian object.⁴⁹¹ There has been some disagreement in scholarship as to the interpretation of the motifs decorating the cross visible between the couple. While Lerner⁴⁹² and Rika Gyselen⁴⁹³ have interpreted them as ribbons, Philippe Gignoux has described them as cornucopias.⁴⁹⁴



Fig. 121. Seal from the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris

That crosses on these objects are indeed decorated with ribbons is further confirmed by other Sasanian, non-Christian pieces of art which display similar motifs. For example, a silver drachm of Vistahm dated to 594/595⁴⁹⁵ shows a fire altar decorated with two

⁴⁸⁹ Gyselen (1993), 107, pl. XVIII, Fig. 22.2; Lerner (1977), 35, pl. III, Fig. 17.

⁴⁹⁰ Frye (1977), 41; Gignoux (1978), 63; Gyselen (1993), 107; note that there has been some disagreement on the reading of this inscription. While Gignoux and Gyselen read the first part of the inscription as 'Nisān' and the second part as 'confiance dans la divinité', Frey in Lerner's publication mentions only that the invocation 'refuge in God' is preceded by a 'proper name'.

⁴⁹¹ This has been suggested by Gignoux (1980), 308. Gyselen, however, has noted that one should be cautious when attributing a particular seal to Christianity on the basis of an invocation to a god only, Gyselen (2006), 29–30.

⁴⁹² Lerner (1977), 35.

⁴⁹³ Gyselen (2006), 52.

⁴⁹⁴ Gignoux (1978), 63.

⁴⁹⁵ Nelson (2011), 376.

ribbons fluttering symmetrically on its both sides (Fig. 122). In a more naturalistic manner ribbons were represented in a very similar scene on a coin of Yazdgard I (r. 399-420)⁴⁹⁶ (Fig. 123). Ribbons appear also on stucco plaques of the Sasanian period and examples are stucco tiles with pomegranates and a representation of a ram.⁴⁹⁷ It is important to note that a distinctive feature of ribbons represented in many Sasanian art objects are the aforementioned short lines representing folds.⁴⁹⁸ In most Sasanian objects of art they fill the whole surface of a ribbon, are rendered horizontally in such a way that lines are parallel one to another, and in some cases play of light and shadow brings out the effect of folds. The number of ribbons represented in this manner in Persian art proves that these short lines constituted in fact the very essence of a representation of a ribbon. Therefore, their existence as a part of the motifs represented on Christian stuccoes, seals and coins encourages the identification of these motifs as ribbons.

⁴⁹⁶ Nelson (2011), 364-366.

⁴⁹⁷ Harper (1978), 107, 110; Kröger (1982), pl. 81, 1, 3.

⁴⁹⁸ See for example Sasanian coins with representations of a fire altar, Nelson (2011), 335-399.



Fig. 122. Silver drachm of Vistahm I



Fig. 123. Drachm of Yazdgard I

In the light of these examples it is certain that Christians of the Sasanian Persia as well as those living in Mesopotamia and the Gulf region in the early Islamic period employed the Sasanian motif of a ribbon in their artistic repertoire. What is unclear is whether this adaptation concerned only the visual aspect of the motif or also its symbolic meaning. In other words, should we understand a ribbon decorating a cross as a purely decorative motif or could it also be interpreted symbolically?

Before answering this question, it is important to discuss the possibility that a motif of a beribboned cross is rooted in a widely spread image of a cross framed by leaves.⁴⁹⁹ When adapting a motif of ribbons into their artistic repertoire Christians, it seems, transformed the 'ready-to-use' composition of a foliated cross. In the process of appropriation of Sasanian ribbons, they incorporated this new motif in such a way that it replaced leaves at the bottom of a cross. Another interpretation of a beribboned cross that has been proposed in scholarship – the one by Gignoux who understood the motif in question as cornucopias – has also to be considered. Representations of cornucopias were known in Persian art and are attested for many Parthian objects. Examples are tetradrachms of Artabanus III, Vardanes I and Goterzes where cornucopias are held by a personification of a City (Tyche).⁵⁰⁰ On a much more monumental scale a cornucopia is visible in a scene of investiture on the rock relief in Tang-e Sarvak in Elymais where one of the figures attending the ruler carries what can be interpreted as a horn of plenty.⁵⁰¹ In contrast to these Parthian examples, however, the motifs decorating crosses constitute a symmetrical composition. More importantly, it seems that cornucopias were not at all popular in art of the Sasanian period. The possible reason why Gignoux has interpreted the motifs in question as horns of plenty is because of certain formal similarity between the ribbons in Christian images to cornucopias: in all the aforementioned Christian objects ribbons rise from a lower part of a vertical beam of a cross or from its base and frame the cross at its two sides. On the contrary, in most Sasanian scenes where ribbons are used in a similar symmetrical composition decorating

⁴⁹⁹ It has been mentioned above that such a possibility has been noted by Okada and Lerner.

⁵⁰⁰ Gardner, Malter and Mushīrī (1981), 55–57.

⁵⁰¹ Berghe and Schippmann (1985), 68, Fig. 9, pl. 28–29.

a fire altar, they hang downwards. There is, however, a precise moment – beginning of reign of Khursau I in 531 – when this changes. On his coins ribbons marked with horizontal lines rise upwards from a fire altar just as they do on Christian seals and a coin of Yazdgard I. This modification of a motif of a fire altar continued far into the later period, up to the end of Sasanian rule in Persia, and in fact coins of almost all the kings of the sixth and the seventh centuries display ribbons in an upward position.⁵⁰² This proves that ribbons fluttering upwards and framing a central motif of a composition were known in official Sasanian art at least in the second quarter of the sixth century⁵⁰³ and that this motif could have easily been transferred to Christian iconography.

In order to answer the question of the possible symbolic meaning of a beribboned cross, it is necessary to turn to the history of iconography of ribbons in Sasanian art. Originally the motif of a ribbon constituted part of a more complicated design of a beribboned diadem, which was reserved for royal and divine figures and symbolized their exceptional power and splendour.⁵⁰⁴ These notions of authority and kingship, known as *xʷarānah* (Avestan) or *farr* (Middle Persian) are very central to Sasanian iconography and, beside ribbons, they can be conveyed by a number of motifs, among them probably: a pair of wings, disk, ring, sunflower, ram and pomegranate as well as a roundel of pearls.⁵⁰⁵ In fact it was common in Sasanian art to multiply symbols of *farr* in order to express *farrah afzūn*, which should be translated as: ‘may glory be increased’.⁵⁰⁶ This abstract concept was expressed in art in what Abolala Soudavar has called a ‘hybrid syntax, combining words and symbols’.⁵⁰⁷ An example is a sixth century stucco plaque from Ctesiphon on which the Pahlavi inscription reads *afzūn* – increase or

⁵⁰² See coins of Khursau I, Hormizd IV, Bahram VI, Bistām, Khursau II, Kavādh II, Khursau III or V, Bōrān, Āzarmīdokht, Hormizd V or VI and Yazdgard III. The only king of the later Sasanian period at whose coin ribbons hang downwards was Ardashir III; Nelson (2011), 376–385.

⁵⁰³ This, however, does not provide an obvious *terminus post quem* for Christian objects with similar representations. As has been already discussed, a Christian coin decorated with a cross framed with ribbons in an upward position and issued by local authorities in Merv is dated to reign of Yazdgard I (399–420). It is plausible, then, that the motif in question had been known to Sasanians but did not penetrate into official iconography of the state until the reign of Khursau I. While circulating in non-official art in Persia it was adopted by Christians and introduced into their artistic repertoire.

⁵⁰⁴ Göbl (1954), 61; Shepherd (1972), 79.

⁵⁰⁵ Gnoli (1999); Soudavar (2016), Soudavar (2009), 424–425.

⁵⁰⁶ Soudavar (2009), 435–437.

⁵⁰⁷ Soudavar (2010).

increased – and the pair of wings as well as the roundel of pearls are symbols of *farr* (Fig. 124). This fusion of the word *afzūn* with the motifs symbolising *farr* gives, as Soudavar has put it, the notion of *farr-afzun*.⁵⁰⁸ Another interesting example of this multiplication of *farr* symbols are the aforementioned tiles with pomegranates tied with ribbons. The motifs of a beribboned diadem and a beribboned crown emerged already in Parthian times and gained their peak of popularity in the Sasanian period, as is confirmed by stone relief scenes of investiture and representations of king of kings known from Sasanian coinage and silver plates (Fig. 125).⁵⁰⁹ At some point the motif of ribbons was detached from the representation of a diadem or a crown and became an independent symbol of kingly majesty and divine glory, as is clear from the examples mentioned above.



Fig. 124. Sasanian stucco plaque, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York

⁵⁰⁸ Soudavar (2003), 19–20.

⁵⁰⁹ Harper (1978), 33, 35, 40, 48; Pope (1938), 154–160.



Fig. 125. Sasanian silver plate, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, marked with arrows are ribbons

This symbolic meaning of ribbons in Sasanian art provides good ground for arguing that a ribbon was transferred into the Christian art of Mesopotamia and the Gulf not only as a decorative pattern but also as an easily recognizable and understandable symbol of divine glory and kingly authority. It seems also to be very promising to try to apply Soudavar's theory of *farr-afzūn* to representations of crosses decorated with ribbons. There is no need to argue that a cross is a very central symbol to Christianity, a subject of contemplation and veneration. But it is important to stress that in Syriac Christianity the cross was understood as a symbol of victory and, as Cyril Karim has put it:

In Syriac Christianity (...) the theology of symbols continued to play a leading role in the Church's life at whose centre stands the Cross. In the Cross all elements of theology are present. One can justly say that Syriac theology is truly a theology of the Cross.⁵¹⁰

⁵¹⁰ Karim (1994), 198.

A cross could have been, therefore, easily understood by Persian Christians as a symbol of *farr* – glory and kingship. To decorate it with a ribbon might thus have been an act of glorifying it, of expressing *farr-afzun*. It is also not without importance here that Christians of Persia perceived the earthly king of kings as a reflection of the heavenly King. Such a parallel can be found in the *Acts of Symeon* where Jesus is described as a king of kings.⁵¹¹ Another Christian text, a letter of the catholicos Timothy I (r. 780-823) reads:

We pray God, who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to preserve the crown of the kingdom and throne to the Commander of the Faithful for multitudinous days and numerous years! ⁵¹²

So it is possible that the association earthly king – heavenly king has found its reflection in art in the practice of employing a symbol of kingly glory, a ribbon, in an image of a cross – the most important symbol of Christian victory and kingship. It can be said, in other words, that the Sasanian notion of *farr-afzun* – increased glory – had been expressed in the objects in question by composing symbols of heavenly *farr* and earthly *farr*: a cross and a ribbon.

In sum, there is ground to believe that bands represented on Christian stuccoes of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf are indeed ribbons and – if so – that they convey religious meaning rooted in the Sasanian tradition.

But there is yet another possible explanation of those ambiguous motifs in Christian art, proposed by Matteo Compareti in the context of Armenian art in Late Antiquity. As he has argued, a motif that spread in Christian regions subjugated to Iran and dependent on Persian visual traditions in the sixth-seventh centuries was a cross supported by a pair of wings. This has been demonstrated by the author through examples of Armenian stelae and reliefs⁵¹³ and in reference to the large panel from al-Qusur,

⁵¹¹ In translation into Latin: 'Iesus est rex regnum; humero nostro iugum subactionis vestrae non imponemus', Kmosko (1907), 733–734.

⁵¹² Young (1974), 134.

⁵¹³ Compareti (2010), 203–204.

although the scholar has admitted that the motif is 'stylized' in the latter example.⁵¹⁴ It cannot be ruled out that Compareti's interpretation is correct and one could suppose that the specific shape of al-Qusur bands with their upper parts tapering and curving towards the ends may be a distant echo of wings represented in Sasanian works of art. Also on one of the plaques from al-Hira (cat. no. 48), elements supporting the cross⁵¹⁵ seem to be very similar to wings on an Armenian relief dated to the sixth-seventh century (Fig. 126). One could even argue that two leaves visible on the plaque from Sir Bani Yas bear some similarities to Sasanian wings in their function as pedestals. It would be difficult, however, to argue the same for bands represented on other al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia plaques.



Fig. 126. Armenian stela, wings visible on the right-hand part (marked with arrows)

⁵¹⁴ Note that Compareti has wrongly associated Christians of Failaka with 'the Lakhmid Kingdom'. While Christian communities might have been subjugated to and culturally influenced by the Persian Arabs in the pre-Islamic era, it would be an overstatement to call them 'the Lakhmids'. It should be also mentioned that Compareti has accepted the fifth–sixth century date of al-Qusur stuccoes. In his brief discussion of the motif or ribbons/wings attached to the cross on the al-Qusur panel the author has stated that: 'It is possible that [in the case of, A.L.] the extreme stylisation of the wings in the stucco at al-Qusur (...) there is a precise intention in removing any connection with the Sasanians'. He has not supported this argument with any arguments beside references to 'Syriac patristic literature' attesting hostile attitude of the Sasanians towards Christians.

⁵¹⁵ Al-Ka'bi (2014), 94, Fig. 12.



Fig. 127. Sasanian stucco plaque from Kish

Irrespective of the proper identification of motifs visible on stuccoes from al-Qusur, al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia, the symbolic interpretation of this motif as presented above seems to be valid. Wings were undoubtedly associated with divine and royal glory and the notion of *farr*.⁵¹⁶ It has been also argued by Compareti that the symbol used in a Christian context as a support for the cross follows the iconographic model of wings supporting an important Sasanian symbol. An example of such model is the aforementioned stucco plaque with spread wings under an inscription reading *afzūn*. That the motif of spread wings was a powerful symbol still in the Umayyad period is confirmed by mosaics of the Dome of the Rock. One of them shows a pair of bejewelled wings decorating a diadem, which was interpreted by Oleg Grabar as a transformed

⁵¹⁶ Soudavar (2003), 19–25; Compareti (2010), 214.

representation of a crown.⁵¹⁷ A very similar motif separates suras⁵¹⁸ in a Quranic codex created in Damascus in the Umayyad period.⁵¹⁹

It is clear, therefore, that irrespective of whether the motifs in question should be interpreted as ribbons or wings, its function was likely to express *farr-afzun* in the Christian context. Such a possibility seems to be supported by examples of crosses decorated with both ribbons and wings known from the fifth century Georgia.⁵²⁰ They demonstrate that both motifs were seen as appropriate decorative motifs for a cross and it is likely that they had a similar symbolic meaning.

It is also possible that the identification of the motif in question was not always clear for Christians of Early Islamic period themselves, or at least not always. It does not seem coincidental that in many cases band-like elements seem to be deprived of characteristics that would allow their precise identification. The stuccoes in question were created at least a century after the fall of the Sasanian Empire and it is probable that by that time knowledge of Persian religious and royal symbols had faded away. It might have been, therefore, sufficient to understand the symbolical meaning of those motifs and to use them in art, but insufficient to 'follow the blueprint' and render those motifs with attention to detail. What was important was symbolical notions that they suggested, not the specific execution.

6.1.2. Pomegranates

Another interesting combination of a purely Christian symbol and a Sasanian motif is a decoration carved at a wall of a domestic building at Tell Dahab close to the twin city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (cat. no. 3).⁵²¹ It comprises a rectangular panel filled with

⁵¹⁷ Grabar (1959), 47, note 80; another interpretation has been offered more recently by Myriam Rosen-Ayalon who argued that the motif is a schematic representation of an angel, (1989), 54.

⁵¹⁸ Déroche (2014), 93, Fig. 23.

⁵¹⁹ Déroche (2014), 75–76.

⁵²⁰ Compareti (2010), 211.

⁵²¹ Reuther (1933), 32, Fig. 18.

a repetitive motif of pomegranates, which must have been stamped in wet plaster. Below and to the left are carved: an anchor-like shape and a simple cross.

It has been already mentioned that a pomegranate was yet another symbol of *farr*. In combination with a symbol of a cross and an anchor – which may be understood as the Christian symbol of hope – the decoration might have had a similar function to the cross decorated with ribbons and expressed a Christian thought, possibly connected to the hope for resurrection. It has to be noticed, however, that in the case of the Tell Dahab decoration there is no strong compositional link between the cross and the pomegranates panel and that they are executed in different techniques. It is possible, therefore, that their juxtaposition is not fully intended and that both were not linked symbolically. This possibility is strengthened by the opinion of Jens Kröger who has argued that the rectangular panel is a spolium.⁵²² It might have been reused by the owner of the house for as a decorative element and the cross with an anchor was added at a different time and for a different purpose.

6.1.3. Vine scrolls

In Sasanian iconography the motif of a vine scroll became associated with vegetation and fertility. In ancient Iran these notions were personified by the goddess Anahita. In art, therefore, vine branches, stems and leaves were often depicted as an accompaniment to the image of this goddess. A good example of this scheme is a fourth century silver and partially gilded plate with cast relief scenes of Anahita dancing among vine scrolls (Fig. 128).⁵²³ During centuries of development of Sasanian art this indigenous iconography of Anahita became blended with Dionysiac motifs of Greco-Roman origin.⁵²⁴ The earliest period in which western art influenced Sasanian art, as a result of which musicians, dancers and entertainers were included in a repertoire of motifs

⁵²² Kröger (1982), 42; Kröger (2007), 146.

⁵²³ Shepherd (1964), 79, 81.

⁵²⁴ Shepherd (1964), 82.

associated with Anahita and wine, was in the Hellenistic epoch.⁵²⁵ Also later, in Roman times, Dionysiac motifs were spread from Classical into Sasanian art ⁵²⁶ and 'the grapevine thus became the ubiquitous symbol of eternal life and fruitfulness'⁵²⁷.



Fig. 128. The Anahita Plate, Cleveland Museum of Art

It is not clear in what contexts the vine scroll in Sasanian art is a bearer of symbolical meaning, and where it is used as a purely decorative motif. It may be supposed that whenever combined with other elements of the Anahita-Dionysius repertoire, it is expressing some symbolic notions. But in many cases in Sasanian art it is just a single, simple vine scroll, sometimes inhabited, that decorates architectural elements and vessels. Such is the case of the sixth or seventh century Iranian plate covered with a vine scroll which creates circular curves and is inhabited by animals.⁵²⁸ The vine scroll represented on this plate is of a linear, ornamental character and its particular elements

⁵²⁵ Shepherd (1964), 82; Ettinghausen (1972), 7.

⁵²⁶ Harper (1978), 72; Ettinghausen (1972), 8.

⁵²⁷ Harper (1978), 72.

⁵²⁸ Harper (1978), 62.

such as leaves and bunches of grapes are geometrized. The general impression is that this representation is non-naturalistic and rigid and it may be safely summarized that these qualities were characteristic of most of the Sasanian scrolls.⁵²⁹ Another good example of this style is a stucco plaque from Čal Țarḥān (Fig. 129), which was produced most probably in the early Islamic period but in design follows entirely earlier Sasanian examples.⁵³⁰



Fig. 129. Plaque from Čal Țarḥān

Importantly for the current discussion, vine scrolls known from Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf show profound similarities to their Sasanian counterparts. This is especially clear in a comparison of vine scrolls from Jubail (cat. nos 117–118) or Kharg (cat. nos 92–93) with the aforementioned stucco plaque from Čal Țarḥān. In all those works of art the vine scroll is characteristic for its rigidness and certain aridness, which is in contrast to many vine scrolls of the Greco-Roman tradition.⁵³¹

⁵²⁹ Kröger (1982), 239; for works of art with similar features see for example: Kröger (1978), pl. 38.2, 80.4, 94.5., 103.4, 104.1–3.

⁵³⁰ Kröger (1982), 201–202.

⁵³¹ Note that in some regions of the Roman and early Byzantine world, especially in north Africa, stylized, 'rigid' and 'arid' vine scrolls were also popular. See for example: Ben Abed (2006), Fig. 54, pl. 27.

6.1.4. Pearls

Examples of strings or rows of knobs as decorative motifs come from both southern Mesopotamia (Tulul al-Ukhaidir, 'Ain Sha'ia, al-Hira; cat. nos 6, 12–14, 27–28, 44–45) as well as from the Gulf (Sir Bani Yas stuccoes, type 2, for example: cat. no. 185). In the Iranian world similar decorative elements were unequivocally understood as pearls and indeed extremely popular.⁵³² As has been already mentioned, pearls constitute – according to Soudavar – yet another symbol of *farr*. It is certainly possible that Christians in the post-Sasanian period still acknowledged such a symbolic meaning of pearls but it is equally thinkable that they were using pearls as simply decorative elements. It has to be remembered that Christians of the Gulf were involved in pearl fishing in the Gulf⁵³³ and thus pearls were a part of their everyday life, a part of an experience that could have been easily transferred into art. This seems to be especially true for stuccoes from Sir Bani Yas island which were also decorated with other motifs reflecting the natural environment and day-to-day experience of Christian inhabitants of the island such as palm trees (for example cat. no. 205).⁵³⁴

6.2. Classical and Byzantine influences

Byzantine influences visible in the Koke relief will be discussed in detail in the following section of the chapter and what will be considered here are classical and Byzantine features traceable in certain smaller stuccoes from the region.

The best example of such influences is a fragment of stucco plaque from 'Akkaz, Kuwait (cat. no. 50, Fig. 12). It shows a part of a cross under a horseshoe arch, only a small section of which – supported by a column – is visible. The column with its vertical, parallel lines imitating column fluting is reminiscent of classical architecture. Also its structural elements seem to have classical parallels. The capital of the column looks as if it was

⁵³² Kröger (1982), 230–231.

⁵³³ See Chapter 1.

⁵³⁴ Stuccoes of type 4.

composed of abacus and echinus and its base resembles the ionic moulding of trochilus, torus, and trochilus. In contrast to representations of pillars and other architectural supports visible on the plaque from Sir Bani Yas and the panel from al-Qusur, the artists took measures to represent the three-dimensionality of the column (Fig. 131).⁵³⁵ Although the result is somewhat clumsy and instead of a convincing architectural perspective there is an impossible three-sided view, it seems that the artist was familiar with the Greco-Roman tradition of representing architecture.

Certain influence of classical architecture is also visible in two plaques from al-Hira, on which horseshoe arches are supported by massive impostes (cat. nos 43, 45). Although very simplified and stylized they show an essentially classical approach towards architecture with its visual balance between supported and supporting elements of the construction. Furthermore, the architectural structures represented on those plaques seem to have little in common with Sasanian architecture, in which arches were widely used but not in combination with such impostes and pillars.

⁵³⁵ The uniqueness of the representation of architecture in the 'Akkaz plaque has been already noticed by Gachet-Bizollon (2011), 138.

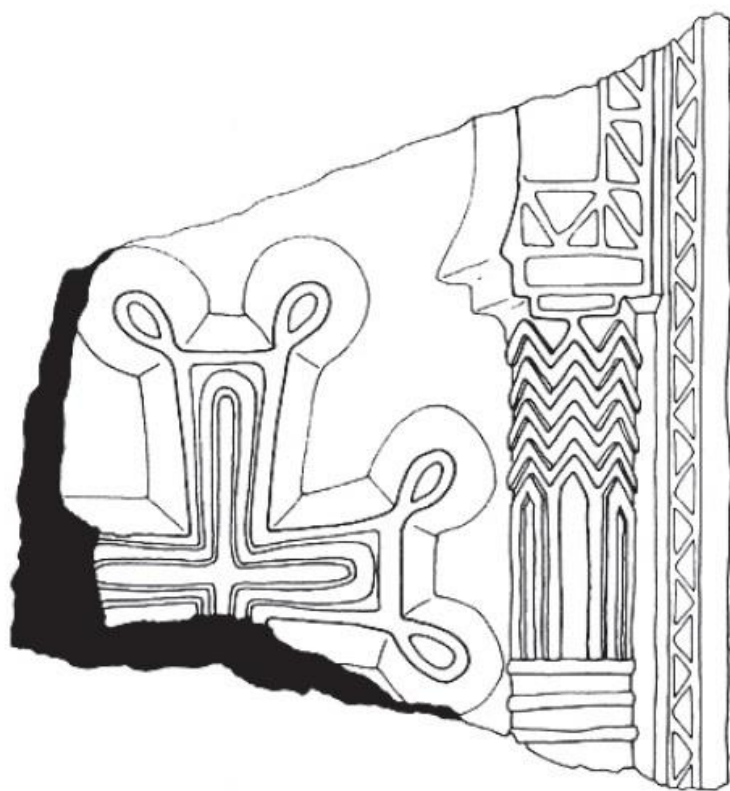


Fig. 130. Stucco plaque from 'Akkaz



Fig. 131. Stucco plaque from 'Akkaz

6.3. The Koke relief

The almost life-size representation of a person deprived of the head, the right hand and feet executed in high relief and excavated at a church in Koke is the only figural representation among the material discussed in this thesis (cat. no. 1). The person represented is wearing a blue tunic and red toga and in some parts, especially in the right leg section, the fabric reveals the musculature of the body. Reuther in his report of the discovery of this figure mentioned that 'the neckband' or 'the collar' was decorated with a golden border⁵³⁶ but the gilt is no longer visible. The left arm and forearm is preserved but the palm is missing. The remaining part of the hand looks anatomically incorrect, as if it was assembled erroneously after the relief was excavated. Jens Kröger and Stefan Hauser are probably right in arguing that originally the left forearm might have been stretched outwards and possibly slightly lifted, supporting an object.⁵³⁷ If they are right, then the object could have been a codex – a popular attribute of Christ and saints in Christian iconography.

The relief was unearthed during the excavation season of winter 1928/1929 by the German expedition to Ctesiphon in the chancel of the single-aisle church of Koke (Fig. 132).⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ Reuther (1930), 12.

⁵³⁷ Kröger (2007), 141; Hauser (2008), 41.

⁵³⁸ For more about this church see Chapter 1.

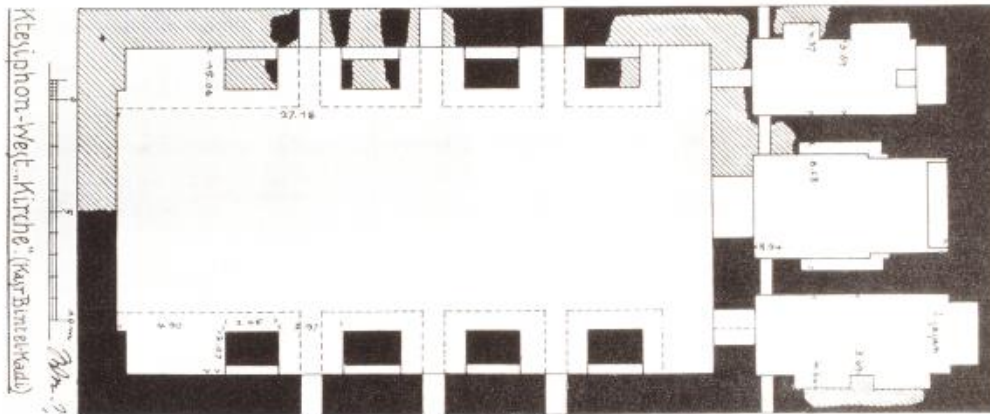


Fig. 132. Plan of the church at Koke

The identification of the room as the chancel is confirmed by four holes in the floor indicating the original existence of the altar. The room ends with a flat wall, to which a kind of podium is adjoined. It could have originally supported the relief, the back side of which was attached to the back wall of the room (Fig. 133). Around the relief some further fragments of stuccoes were found and most probably they had originally composed an archivolt framing the relief (cat. no 2).⁵³⁹

The main research questions related to the Koke relief are: when was it produced, who is the person represented, and how it should be conceptualized in terms of iconographic and stylistic traditions and legacies. The first of those issues has been already discussed in Chapter 5. Here, the focus is on the latter two problems.

⁵³⁹ Kröger (2007), 143.



Fig. 133. Sanctuary of the church at Koke

The closest, both geographically and chronologically, example of a Christian work of art representing a human figure comes from Susa. It is a stucco plaque measuring 13.5 x 8.4 centimetres decorated with a human figure, most probably a male saint, under an arch (Fig. 22).⁵⁴⁰ There are, however, profound differences between those objects and little, aside from the theme itself, is shared by the plaque and the Koke sculpture. While the relief is a monumental, three-dimensional sculpture in high relief, the Susa plaque is a small object and the representation is executed in low relief. Also the style of the Susa plaque with its *horror vacui* impression is very different from the classical character of the Koke relief. For these reasons the plaque is of little help in understanding the above questions.

⁵⁴⁰ Gyselen (2006), 32.

Oscar Reuther, the excavator of the site, has attempted to trace non-Byzantine influences in this sculpture and has argued that it shows close parallels to the winged figure from Taq-i-Bustan dated to the late sixth-early seventh century (Fig. 134).⁵⁴¹ Indeed, the way the robes reveal body shapes and are draped around calves and ankles in both representations is similar. However, this resemblance may testify – contrary to Reuther’s interpretation – not as much to the Sasanian artistic roots of the Koke relief as to the fact that it was directly inspired by the art of the Byzantine Empire. It has been firmly established in the scholarly literature that Victory figures from Taq-i-Bustan resemble in many details, such as composition, costumes, facial features and hair arrangement, Byzantine works of art of the pre-Iconoclastic era.⁵⁴²



Fig. 134. Relief in Taq-i-Bustan

⁵⁴¹ Reuther (1929), 450; Reuther (1930), 14; Mackinosh (1978). The generally non-classical character of the relief was noticed also by Robert Heidenreich (1963), 476. However, his observation that the way garments are painted with red and blue is the result of a 'lack of understanding' of classical rules and the 'inorganic' approach should be treated with caution as it seems that he regarded both the red sections and blue sections as belonging to one piece of garment instead of two separate: a tunic and a toga.

⁵⁴² Mackinosh (1978).

A closer look at the Koke relief reveals many elements that are not characteristic for Sasanian art. The robes are of very classical character and do not resemble typical Sasanian garments worn by kings and gods on rock reliefs.⁵⁴³ It is also difficult to point out any examples of polychrome monumental sculptures in Sasanian art, although this may be due to poor state of preservation. This lack of obvious Persian comparanda to the Koke relief has inclined scholars to look into the art of the Byzantine Empire in the search for artistic parallels to the sculpture. This line of research seems to be particularly promising taking into account that the very building the Koke relief was originally located (Fig. 132) resembles in plan Byzantine churches of the region of Ṭur ‘Abdin in Northern Mesopotamia (Figs 33–34) with their single nave corpuses and niches at longer walls.

Over the course of the early Byzantine period, production of statues declined substantially⁵⁴⁴ and therefore it is ivory and metal reliefs that might have been a source of inspiration for the author of the Koke relief. Such a possibility has been suggested by Jens Kröger who has compared the Koke relief to two silver book covers representing St Peter and St Paul⁵⁴⁵ produced in Syria in the second half of the sixth century.⁵⁴⁶ There certainly is a noticeable similarity between those figures and the Koke figure but even stronger affinity is noticeable between the relief and another metal book cover dated to the same period, in which robes of two unidentified saints are draped densely at one leg and fit tightly to another (Fig. 135).⁵⁴⁷ A slightly earlier example of how portable works of Byzantine art decorated in relief could have served as inspiration for the Koke relief are two ivory objects: a relief with Ariadne (Fig. 136) created possibly in Egypt in the early

⁵⁴³ Peck (1969); Peck (1992).

⁵⁴⁴ On the decline of public statues in Late Antiquity and the relative unpopularity of statues in the eastern provinces of Byzantium see Smith (2016), 5–9, Figs 1.4–1.5; Gehn and Ward-Perkins (2016), 115–118 and Anderson (2016), 290–295.

⁵⁴⁵ Kröger (1982), 47. It should be noted that for Kröger the Koke figure is relatively close to the classical tradition. For example, he has compared this relief to paintings from the ninth century Dar al-Khilafa (known also as the Jawsaq al-Khaqani palace) in Samarra, which show two girls wearing folded robes and dancing and stated that the Koke figure is closer, than this painting, to the ‘unknown classical model’; Kröger (2007), 142; for more about the Dar al-Khilafa painting see Herzfeld (1927), 9–13, pl. I–III.

⁵⁴⁶ Weitzmann (1979), 618.

⁵⁴⁷ Weitzmann (1979), 619.

sixth century and a diptych with Roma and Constantinopolis (Fig. 137) produced probably in Constantinople in the late fifth-early sixth century.⁵⁴⁸ Characteristic for both those ivories and for the Koke relief is the way draperies of those figures are folded at the bottom in a very characteristic, stylized way.



Fig. 135. Silver book cover, Syria, second half of the sixth century



Fig. 136. Relief with Ariadne, Egypt (?), early sixth century

⁵⁴⁸ Weitzmann (1979), 173–174.



Fig. 137. Diptych with Roma and Constantinopolis, Constantinople (?), late fifth-early sixth century

An important feature of the Koke relief is the way it is painted with bright red and blue. The same combination of colours is visible in robes of figures represented in miniatures⁵⁴⁹ of a group of manuscripts created in Syria in the sixth century. It is especially one of the miniatures from the Rabbula Gospels with Christ enthroned (Fig. 138)⁵⁵⁰ that shows great similarity to the Koke relief. In both cases the figure wears a classical, purple toga in the Roman 'toga trabeata' style and one end of the cloth hangs downwards over the left shoulder. Underneath the toga, a blue tunic is visible in both cases. Purple togas and blue tunics are worn also by angels, apostles and Old-Testament figures in other Syriac manuscripts and examples are the Vienna Genesis (Fig. 139) and the Sinope Gospels.⁵⁵¹ The more general combination of blue, red and gold in colouring of garments is also characteristic for the Rossano Gospels (Fig. 140).⁵⁵² The three latter

⁵⁴⁹ The possibility that the miniature painting could have served as a template for the Koke relief was expressed by Heidenreich (1963), 477. However, his justification of this view is obscure and based on the assumption that the painting of the sculpture is 'inorganic', which is difficult to agree with.

⁵⁵⁰ Weitzmann (1977), pl. 37; Weitzmann (1979), 495.

⁵⁵¹ Weitzmann (1977), pl. 28; Weitzmann (1979), 458, 491.

⁵⁵² Weitzmann (1977), pl. 29–33; Weitzmann (1979), 492.

manuscripts create a group of purple codices that are associated with Antioch and were created in the sixth century, even though they were not necessarily produced in that city.⁵⁵³ The Rabbula Gospels are dated to the same period (ca. 586)⁵⁵⁴ and were created also in the region of Apamea, less than 100 km from Antioch.⁵⁵⁵



Fig. 138. Miniature in the Rabbula Gospels

⁵⁵³ Weitzmann (1977), 21.

⁵⁵⁴ Weitzmann (1979), 495.

⁵⁵⁵ Mango (1983).



Fig. 139. Miniature in the Vienna Genesis



Fig. 140. Miniature in the Rossano Gospels

In conclusion, it seems very probable that it was from the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire that a general model for Koke relief was transmitted. Further artistic and architectural links add weight to this argument. For example, it should be noted that the very church, in which the relief in question was located is extremely similar in plan to a group of churches in northern Mesopotamia, within the Byzantine borders.⁵⁵⁶ Also historical conditions seem to be supportive of this possibility. Throughout the Sasanian period inhabitants and artists of the region of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, located not far away

⁵⁵⁶ Those churches have been discussed in Chapter 3, see especially Figs 33–34.

from the Byzantine border, must have had many possibilities to meet Byzantine captives and traders as well as to see objects produced in the Byzantine Empire. But the moment when those contacts certainly intensified was after 539 when captives from Antioch in Syria taken by the Sasanian army were displaced to a new settlement in the Seleucia-Ctesiphon region called Weh Antiok Khursau (Better Antioch of Khursau), known also as New Antioch (Fig. 2)⁵⁵⁷ and located just five kilometres from Koke.⁵⁵⁸ In 573 captives from Dara were also resettled here.⁵⁵⁹ Importantly for the present discussion, it was not only the name that the Sasanian town took from Syrian Antioch. Weh Antiok Khursau was, according to historical sources, modelled on Byzantine Antioch and followed the urban plan, network of streets and dimensions of the Syrian city. A legend has it even that Persian Antioch was so similar to its Syrian counterpart that people resettled there knew without instructions which houses were theirs.⁵⁶⁰ Even if there is much exaggeration in such historical accounts, it seems likely that there was a strong sense of continuity between old Antioch and New Antioch erected near Ctesiphon. This is further supported by Procopius's account, according to which wall marbles looted in Byzantine Antioch were transported to Persia and Greek craftsmen and artists worked in the city under Persian supervision to adorn the city with marble and mosaics.⁵⁶¹

It is therefore likely that certain features, such as the generally classical character of the relief, the draperies and the colour scheme, were inspired directly by Byzantine art. But why was a Byzantine model adapted into a medium that was not 'Byzantine' at all, that is to monumental sculpture? As has already been mentioned, sculpture, beside small-sale objects executed in relief, in Byzantine art in this period declined noticeably. One of few Christian monumental sculptures known from eastern Byzantium and dated roughly

⁵⁵⁷ Mango (1975), 226; Fiey (1967), 26; the Arabic name of the city was al-Rumiyah (the Roman), Fiey (1967), 26.

⁵⁵⁸ Fiey (1967), 26, 37.

⁵⁵⁹ Mango (1975), 226; Fiey (1967), 27.

⁵⁶⁰ Fiey (1967), 26.

⁵⁶¹ Fiey (1967), 25–26.

to the same period⁵⁶² is a unique example of a funerary relief (Fig. 141) representing a narrative scene from Dara, located just by the Byzantine-Persian border. The relief shows Ezekiel in the Valley of the Dry Bones⁵⁶³ and – possibly – three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace⁵⁶⁴ as well as Manasses' sins.⁵⁶⁵ Although located within the borders of the Byzantine Empire, it can hardly be seen as representative of Byzantine sculpture of the era. In fact, the relief was most probably inspired by Sasanian monumental reliefs, very popular in Late Antique Persia⁵⁶⁶, and possibly also by Christian sculptures produced in Persia similar to the Koke relief.⁵⁶⁷



Fig. 141. Dara relief

Monumental sculpture was therefore almost non-existent in eastern Byzantium in the late pre-Islamic era and extremely popular in Sasanian Persia of the same period.⁵⁶⁸ It is thus not surprising to see many similarities between the Koke figure and Sasanian reliefs.

⁵⁶² For the decreasing appreciation of sculpture in the Roman and Byzantine Empire in third-sixth centuries see Kristensen and Stirling (2016), 13–22; on the decline of sculpture production in the Byzantine Empire in fifth–sixth centuries see Liverani (2016).

⁵⁶³ Mango (1975), 213.

⁵⁶⁴ Mango (1975), 216; Oliver Nicholson has argued that the scene may be interpreted as the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai, Nicholson (1985), 670.

⁵⁶⁵ Mango, 217; Oliver Nicholson has argued that the scene may represent Moses, Aaron and the power of God in form of a pillar of cloud and fire, Nicholson (1985), 670.

⁵⁶⁶ See for example: Harper (1978).

⁵⁶⁷ Mango (1975), 227.

⁵⁶⁸ See for example Haerinck (2006).

The very fact that the technique used is high relief situates the Koke statue within the Persian tradition. Typical Sasanian rock reliefs were very deeply cut and – in some cases – almost detached from their backgrounds and a similar impression would be created by the relief executed in high relief and standing by the eastern wall of the sanctuary.

It should be also noted that the essentially classical elements of the sculpture that were discussed above are rendered in a non-classical manner. The tunic and toga, their colours and the way the musculature of the body is revealed are of Greco-Roman origin but the formal execution of those elements indicate the non-classical background of the artist. It is evident, for example, in the way the toga is folded densely around the torso and the left leg but fit tightly the right leg. The contrast between the folded and unfolded part looks artificial and shows that the sculptor had limited interest in understanding the structural relations between the cloth and the body underneath. It seems, therefore, that he transplanted elements of the foreign visual language but rendered them according to his own understanding of sculpture and the artistic tradition he was more familiar with.

The ability of art of the region to fuse classical and non-classical elements in a single work of art or a decorative programme manifested itself also in the later period and an extraordinary example are stucco figures of Qasr a-Hayr al-Gharbi. A part of those sculptures is executed in a classicizing manner, rooted firmly in the Greco-Roman tradition and reflects contemporary art of the Byzantine Empire. Other figures are of a very different character and while classicizing elements are traceable in togas and tunics of the individuals represented, they are much more stylized and stiff than those of the first group.⁵⁶⁹ Represented in a similar way are figures of musicians on a floor painting of Qasr a-Hayr al-Gharbi.⁵⁷⁰ Here, just as in the case of the Koke relief, classicizing robes obscure rather than reveal the muscularity of the bodies and the way the material is folded is decorative rather than realistic.

⁵⁶⁹ Schlumberger (1986), pl. 64 b, 67; Talgam (2004), 94–96.

⁵⁷⁰ Schlumberger (1986), pl. 34.

The next question regarding the Koke relief that should be answered here is about the identity of the person represented. The excavator of the church, Oscar Reuther, had little doubt regarding this problem and claimed, without providing any supporting evidence, that it: 'can hardly represent any other than a saint, probably the dedicatory saint of the church'.⁵⁷¹ While it is certainly possible that the figure represents a saint, it seems that Reuther's premature arrival at this conclusion might have been due to the fact that in the first part of the 20th-century knowledge of pre-Islamic art of the region was rather limited. The excavations at Ctesiphon directed by Reuther were first to reveal the material culture of Christians in Sasanian Persia. Similarly, scholarship on Sasanian art was rather scarce as Arthur Upham Pope's monumental 'A survey of Persian art from prehistoric times to the present' was yet to be published.⁵⁷² It is therefore understandable that in interpreting the Koke relief Reuther might have turned to the closest available comparanda, that is to Byzantine art. A three-dimensional and almost life-size representation of a god would be, even before the breakout of Iconoclasm, perceived by many in the Byzantine Empire of the early Christian period as dangerously close to pagan practices and idolatry.⁵⁷³ From this Byzantine perspective, therefore, to represent a saint in sculpture was probably a safer choice than to create a three dimensional representation of Christ. A similar assumption might have stood behind Reuther's interpretation of the Koke relief. But the Sasanians were certainly not sympathetic to Byzantine reservations towards representations of human beings. Quite on the contrary, art of Sasanian (and pre-Sasanian) Persia was largely figurative. Religious scenes in macro-scale reliefs are probably the most recognizable works of the pre-Islamic art in Persia and many metal vessels produced by Sasanian artists are occupied with gods and goddesses.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ Reuter (1929), 450; Reuther (1930), 14; a similar opinion was expressed also by Heidenreich (1963), 474.

⁵⁷² Six volumes of the survey were published in years 1938–39.

⁵⁷³ See for example, O'Hogan (2016), 133–145.

⁵⁷⁴ See for example: Harper (1978).

There are a few further indications which allow us to think that the person represented in the relief is not a saint but Christ. Firstly, in the Roman era a purple toga was reserved for gods and emperors – especially triumphators. Toga purpurea was certainly associated with the idea of the divine and – in Suetonius’s words – it had sacred status.⁵⁷⁵ Unfortunately, the purple colour of the toga cannot be regarded as an exclusive attribute of Christ. Also other holy personas – as is demonstrated by the examples of Byzantine miniatures mentioned above – were entitled to wear purple togas in early Christian art and – conversely – Christ was equally often represented wearing a golden toga and blue tunic. Nevertheless, if an artist wanted to represent Christ in sculpture, the choice of purple colour for his toga would certainly be appropriate. Potentially more significant is the fact that originally a part of the figure’s robes near the neck was gilded, as it has been argued by Kröger that golden colour in the decoration of Sasanian stuccoes might have been associated with figures of gods and kings.⁵⁷⁶ More importantly, the relief was placed in the sanctuary of the church, just by its eastern wall.⁵⁷⁷ In terms of liturgical space, it was a location where – in a Byzantine church – one would expect to see an apse, a conch of which would normally be decorated with a mosaic representation of Christ. It is true that such a Byzantine conch would also normally represent a Christ enthroned rather than standing.⁵⁷⁸ But, as it has been demonstrated above, there are reasons to believe that while the patron and the artist responsible for the creation of the relief must have drawn certain inspirations from Byzantine art, their *modus operandi* was essentially Sasanian.

One peculiar element of the garment of the figure, the end of the red toga draped over the left shoulder, may further support the interpretation that the relief represents Christ. It forms a cascade of sharp-cut folds hanging downwards. In the present state of preservation, it reaches the waist of the person represented but it cannot be excluded

⁵⁷⁵ Warren (1970), 60–62.

⁵⁷⁶ Kröger (1982), 219.

⁵⁷⁷ The location of the statue has been already given by Hauser as an argument for the possibility that the figure represents Christ, Hauser (2008), 41.

⁵⁷⁸ The exception is an image of standing Christ in the sixth century scene of Transfiguration in the apse of the church of St Catherine monastery on Mount Sinai; Miziołek (1990), 42, pl. 2b.

that originally it was longer. The draped cloth of the Koke figure finds comparisons in the aforementioned Syriac book cover and the representation of Christ in the Rabbula Gospels (Fig. 138). Certainly in both those representations and in the Koke relief the outer garment is a toga and therefore it is plausible that the draped cloth visible in the stucco figure indeed represents its hanging end, only thinner and in a more stylized way compared with Syriac examples. The difference in the way this part of a toga was rendered by Byzantine artists and by the sculptor of the Koke relief might have been due to the fact that the latter had had little encounter with such an item of clothing. As an artist trained in the Sasanian realm where togas were not popular, he probably only knew those elements of clothing from art, probably Syriac miniatures, or other portable items produced in the Eastern part of Byzantium.

But there is also another possible explanation as to why the artist represented this part of the toga as a stiff strip, which is that he relied on the local tradition and referred to models invented in the preceding Persian era. A simple, stiff and plain strip of the outer garment rolled or folded over the left shoulder was – according to the convincing argumentation presented by Trudy S. Kawami – an attribute of a priest in the art of Khuzestan of the Parthian period.⁵⁷⁹ Priestly figures wearing such rolls are usually represented in narrative scenes of a religious character (presenting offerings) in stone reliefs dated to the second–third century AD. (Figs 142–143),⁵⁸⁰ There is a close visual similarity between rolls visible in these representations and the strip of the Koke relief, especially in the way that each of them is of the same width along its whole length and in the substantial length of the strip itself. A Sasanian artist working in Seleucia-Ctesiphon could have easily known Parthian works of art created in the neighbouring region of Khuzestan and used them as a source of inspiration. It is not clear, however, why the artist would decide to follow an iconographic model that had been set several hundred years earlier. One possible explanation could be that the aim was to represent Christ as the High Priest and the artist achieved it with iconographic means that he was

⁵⁷⁹Kawami (1987), 142–143; I am grateful to Rachel Wood for pointing my attention towards these representations and their possible relation to the Koke statue.

⁵⁸⁰ Kawami (1987), 82–83, 90–92, 119–126, pl. 26, 37–38, 59–61.

familiar with. It is indeed thinkable that a patron of the Koke relief might have wished to express the theological thought of the priesthood of Christ in this work of art and that the artist used for this purpose the attribute that, for him, clearly denoted the priestly nature of the person represented. The idea that a priest performing the Eucharist represents Christ – the High Priest – was imbedded the Dyophysite theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia⁵⁸¹, which was followed by the Church of the East in the first centuries of its existence.⁵⁸² Although it would be difficult to prove conclusively at this stage of research that the fold of the Koke garment was indeed directly inspired by ‘priestly rolls’ of the pre-Sasanian era and that it was represented in order to express such a sophisticated theological idea, the very location of the relief may support such an interpretation. As has been already mentioned, the relief was located originally in the sanctuary of the church, ie in the space where religious rituals would have been performed by priests. It is also without doubt that, of all ecclesiastical buildings of the Church of the East those, in Koke were certainly at the forefront of supporting the theological debate with appropriate visual representations. An equally important argument for the interpretation of the Koke relief as a representation of Christ the Priest is the fact that it dates to the same period when this iconographic type enters the art of the Byzantine empire. In fact, it is the aforementioned miniature from the Rabbula Gospels that is one of the early examples of this iconographic types in Byzantine art. As Alexei Lidov has argued:

In one of the four full-page miniatures of the Syriac manuscript, Christ is represented enthroned among monks in a garden in bloom, framed by an ornate arch crowned with a cross and creating the image of an ideal church. The combination of the pictorial motifs of the garden and the church brings to mind the heavenly Jerusalem, where Christ serves the Liturgy with the righteous. His seat resembles a synthronon, and the arch behind Him, the altar apse. The features of the iconographic type (the hair worn in a double crown, the short beard and the scroll) add to the image of Christ the Priest.⁵⁸³

⁵⁸¹ Oñatiba (1954), 121–122; McLeod (2002), 45.

⁵⁸² See Chapter 1.

⁵⁸³ Lidov (1991), 159.

Providing the formal link between the Rabbula Gospels (and other Syrian) miniatures and the Koke relief it is indeed possible that also similar ideas were embedded in the form and visual features of the latter.

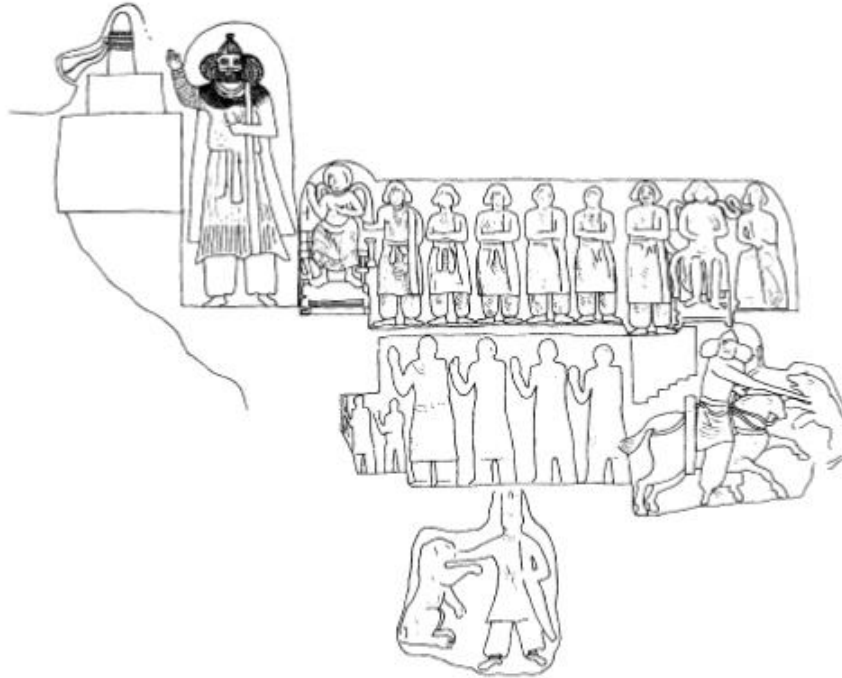


Fig. 142. Relief from Tang-e Sarvak (Rock II)



Fig. 143. Relief from Hung-e Azhdar

Another peculiar element of the garment worn by the relief, ie a strip visible below the neck and under the toga (Fig. 144) should be finally discussed here. The strip narrows down and has a thin frame which was originally painted in red. The main part of the strip

was blue and in its centre there was a sign painted in red, which may be interpreted as a cross. It is difficult to say whether the strip was a separate element or was 'fastened' to the toga or what was its function. The shape resembles somewhat a Byzantine loros, which appeared in coinage in the fifth century⁵⁸⁴ but the odd way it is represented under the toga makes it difficult to propose any reliable identification of this element.

In sum, the Koke relief appears to be neither Byzantine nor Sasanian a piece of sculpture but rather a unique product of entangled cultural influences. It also testifies to the possible double identity of the artist or the patron who was certainly a Christian familiar with artistic trends of the neighboring Christian regions of Syria and northern Mesopotamia but also attached to the Sasanian tradition of the region he lived in.



Fig. 144. Fragment of the Koke relief

⁵⁸⁴ Piltz (2013), 36.

Conclusion

Stucco decorations that are the subject of this thesis were produced over the period of two centuries, or even more. They saw the fall of the Sasanian Empire, the drastic shrinkage of the Byzantine Empire and the emergence of the Islamic caliphate. During that long period Christian stucco production – and their art in general – had been shaped by ever changing and merging cultural traditions and influences. This resulted in the heterogeneous character of the Christian art of southern Mesopotamia, further strengthened by the vast geographic coverage of the Church of the East.

What was common for artistic production of Mesopotamian and Gulf Christians throughout those two centuries was its ability to adopt iconographic motifs – ‘indigenous’ and ‘foreign’ alike – and transform them according to their own needs. This is why many objects produced by Christian communities of the region seem to not ‘fit’ cultural boundaries, as drawn by modern scholars. An excellent example discussed in this chapter is the Koke relief – too Byzantine to be seen as a typically Persian work of art and too Sasanian to be classified as Byzantine; created by an artist who was Persian but operated with a mixed Sasanian-Byzantine repertoire of motifs and formal solutions. It is throughout the whole region that we see stucco decorations that are ‘somewhat’ but not ‘quite’ similar to works of Classical, Byzantine and Sasanian art and it is the same process of adopting and adapting that resulted in the unique character of Christian art of the region. Another example of the ability of Christian art of the region to adopt and adapt motifs created in a different religious setting was the appropriation of the motif of ribbons or wings – not only their visual aspect but also their symbolic connotations.

While the art of both southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf is essentially of heterogenic character, it is not surprising that different parts of the region gravitated either toward the Byzantine art or toward the Sasanian tradition. This further explain the division of

the whole region in question into the two main areas: southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf, which has been outlined in Chapter 2. Thus, the affinity of stuccoes from southern Mesopotamia and north-western Gulf with classical approach in representing architecture may be easily explained by the geographical closeness to the border of the Byzantine empire. The possible – although disputable – incorporation of pomegranates into the decoration of a Christian house at Tell Dahab testifies to an influence coming from other direction, ie Persian tradition. Similar examples, not mentioned above, are decorations from the island of Kharg. Some heart-shaped and round fragments decorated with palmettes and other vegetal motifs from this site (cat. nos 94–96, 103–104) are not comparable with Christian stuccoes from other parts of the region and resemble rosettes and other decorations of the Sasanian era.⁵⁸⁵ This may be explained by the proximity of central Sasanian lands and – even more importantly – the presence of Sasanian architecture on the island.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸⁵ Kröger (1982), pl. 3.7, 4.1, 36.6, 45.2.

⁵⁸⁶ Ghirshman (1960), 6; see also: Hardy-Guilbert (2003) Two stucco pieces, possibly of Sasanian origin, were also found on the Island in 1950s. Information based on the internal documentation made accessible by the Louvre.

7. The Islamic context

The period when Christian stucco production developed in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf coincides largely with the coming of Islam. As it has been demonstrated in the Chapter 1, the Church of the East maintained good relationships with the Islamic authorities and there is no reason not to believe that there was also some kind of cultural and artistic exchange between those two religious communities. In this chapter, the character of Christian stucco production of the region will be thus discussed in the context of Islamic art. The main feature commonly associated with Islamic art is its aniconism, which is also what characterizes Christian stuccoes of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. The non-figurative character of this stucco production will be therefore discussed first in the context of the local traditions and Islamic art. In the latter part of the text attempts will be made in order to explain the phenomenon of the surprising lack of similarities between Christian and Islamic stucco production of the eighth and the early ninth centuries.

7.1. The problem of aniconism

It has been already discussed that the Koke relief is the only figural representation among Christian stuccoes known from the region in question. There is, in fact, no other example of not only of a human figure but also of an animal image testified from the Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf of the early Islamic period.⁵⁸⁷ The variety of iconographic motifs rooted in the world of vegetation, including vine scrolls, palm trees, half-palmettes, rosettes, fleurs-de-lis and simple leaves, as well as the abundance of different types of crosses, do not incline one to believe that it is only due to the bad state of preservation that figural representations do not occur among the

⁵⁸⁷ The geographically closest figural representation is the plaque from Susa, see Fig. 22.

known collections of stuccoes from the region. There must be, therefore, another reason behind this lack of human and animal figures in the Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf.

In the early Islamic era, aniconism was not unusual in art of the Middle East and Christians of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf had plenty of opportunities to familiarize themselves with this approach towards visual creativity. Neighbouring Monophysite Christians of the Byzantine region of northern Mesopotamia were inclined towards aniconic art and decorated their churches with crosses as well as geometric and vegetal motifs.⁵⁸⁸ In the first half of the eighth century the iconoclastic outbreak spread out from Constantinople within the Byzantine Empire and dominated the theological discourse for more than a century.⁵⁸⁹ Importantly, as has been argued by Cyril Mango, this dispute over the cult of images 'ought to be considered not as a strictly Byzantine but as a Near Eastern movement'.⁵⁹⁰ At the same time and further East, Islam with its essentially iconophobic approach towards religious art was shaping artistic choices in the newly conquered regions in an effort to convey the doctrine of the newly emerged religion.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁸ Mundell (1977), 65–69, 74; King (1985), 272–273.

⁵⁸⁹ The Iconoclastic period in the history of Byzantine Empire is marked by two dates: 726 when the emperor Leo III announced that icons should not be venerated and removed an image of Christ from the Chalke Gate in Constantinople and 843 when the cult of icons was formally restored; for a concise introduction to Byzantine Iconoclasm see Mango (1977).

⁵⁹⁰ Mango (1977), 6.

⁵⁹¹ Grabar (2005), 43–56; King (1985), 267–277. I use the term 'iconophobia' in relation to Islam rather than 'iconoclasm' because it has been agreed in the scholarship that the aniconic character of Islamic art was not due to the hostile attitude towards figurative art as such but due to hostile attitude towards non-Islamic doctrinal statements standing behind works of figurative art, King (1985), 269–271. It should be also noted that the aniconic tendencies that shaped early Islamic art did not completely prevent figurative art from appearing in the Islamic context of this period. On the contrary, there are many examples of animate figures in secular art of the Umayyad and Abbasid period. Human and animal representations are important parts of, for example, the stucco decoration of the Umayyad palace Khirbat al-Mafjar and various animals are represented in the famous Mshatta façade dated to the eighth century; on figurative art in early Islam see: Grabar (2005), 49–50; Baer (2004), 4–8; on iconographic differences between religious and secular contexts in the early Islamic society see: Flood (2002), 644. It is also worth noting that according to Grabar Islamic art is essentially aniconic, even if there are examples of figurative representations known from lands under Islamic rule. In his opinion such representations had different functions than in Byzantine or Western European art and that they are: 'undifferentiated from other motifs, as though part of a 'total' system of designs in which not a single category, except writing, was unduly emphasized.', Grabar (2005), 50.

Despite different reasons behind all those aniconic attitudes⁵⁹², the result was the same – the lack of human and animal representations in religious art. This was in sharp contrast to the earlier traditions of those lands. During the Sasanian period, figurative art was extremely important and there are countless examples of kings, bears, rams, ibexes, birds and other living creatures occupying private and public spaces in the form of rock-cut reliefs and stucco decorations.⁵⁹³ Importantly for this discussion, also representations of gods were present in the Zoroastrian context, even if their function was not cultic.⁵⁹⁴

As has been already demonstrated, Christians of the region living under Islamic rule adopted much from earlier Sasanian art. However, in their artistic production they were not only repetitive and conservative but also creative⁵⁹⁵ and it seems that this creativity might have been triggered, at least partially, by the limitations of aniconism. Whether those limitations were imposed by the Islamic authorities or by themselves, either out of respect towards the new law makers or because of the generally aniconic traditions of the region, is unclear. It might have well been a combination of all those factors that inclined Christians to refrain from representing people and animals in art. Regardless of the reasons, this resulted in art that was highly innovative and essentially hybrid⁵⁹⁶. By merging Sasanian techniques and selected iconographic motifs with an aniconic approach towards art, Christian artists of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf created a distinctive iconographic vocabulary. In the search for an iconographic repertoire that

⁵⁹² It should be stressed that not only did all those aniconic attitudes manifest themselves in different manners but also that their sources are divergent. For example, as Sebastian Brock (1975) has demonstrated, there is no evidence that any theological reasons lay behind the Monophysite aniconism.

⁵⁹³ Harper (1978), 108–118; Pope (1938), pl. 154–168.

⁵⁹⁴ Shenkar (2015), 486–493; it has been famously argued by Mary Boyce that the Zoroastrians were iconoclasts. It seems that Michael Shenkar was right, however, in dismissing her theory on the ground that there is not a single literary source mentioning deliberate destruction of cultic images and that gods were represented in monumental rock reliefs in the Sasanian period. Their function is not clear but, according to the author, 'these elaborate scenes of divine investiture by fully anthropomorphic Ahura Mazdā, Anāhitā, and Mithra are 'secular' art entirely deprived of any cultic significance', Shenkar (2015), 489; see also Kröger (1982), 275–276.

⁵⁹⁵ See especially the atypical crosses from Sir Bani Yas and Kharg and large panels from al-Qusur in the previous chapters.

⁵⁹⁶ For more on the concept of 'hybridity' (or 'entanglement') in cultural theory and in archaeology see: Stockhammer (2012), 43–58.

would reconcile the legacy of Sasanian art with reluctance towards figural representations, they made the cross moulded or carved in stucco the very centre of their artistic production. As a result, and as has been discussed in Chapter 2, a great number of variants of a cross was invented or transferred from other Christian regions. The popularity of geometric and vegetal motifs, especially the vine scroll, was due to the same needs.

The hybridity of the artistic repertoire, in which the iconography had to be restricted by the requirements of aniconism has precedents in the art of the Middle East in the early Islamic period. Similar was the situation of Christians in Syro-Palestine who were forced – either by law or by their strategical choice – to erase all representations of humans and living animals from their floor mosaics in churches (Fig. 144). As they were subjects of the Umayyads, one possible interpretation of this act is that they were following direct orders of the new, Muslim rulers.⁵⁹⁷ Another one has been proposed by Henry Maguire who argued that Christians erased images of living creatures from their church floors in order to dismiss any potential accusation of idolatry put forward by the proponents of iconoclasm.⁵⁹⁸ Irrespective of the motivation behind the erasure of the mosaics, by ‘adjusting the image’, as Ute Verstegen has called it, they managed to protect their precious works of art from any potential, iconoclastic attacks. By reducing their iconographic repertoire, Christians of Syro-Palestine were setting the framework of communication, rather than conflict, with both the new authorities and with the wider Christian world.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁷ Verstegen (2012), 67–93.

⁵⁹⁸ Maguire (2009), 116–119.

⁵⁹⁹ On the topic of alterations of Christian mosaics in early Islamic Jordan and Palestine see also Flood (2012), 117. The question of whether the use of human and animal representations in art by Christians would lead to a conflict with Muslim authorities is difficult to answer. There are isolated instances of the hostile attitude of Muslims towards Christian figurative art, for example attacks on images and statues ordered by the caliph Yazid II; King (1985), 267; Grabar (2005), 44. It might have been, however, that the otherwise tolerant attitude of Muslims towards Christian art was possible thanks to the ability of Christian communities to adjust to the new political situation and refrain from provocative artistic actions. Such a possibility has been suggested already by King. The scholar has noted, however, that crosses were likely to be perceived as equally offensive by Muslims as Christian images, King (1985), 272. Other authors have given contrary examples of neutral or even positive attitude of Muslims towards crosses in the early Islamic period: Serjeant and Lewcock (1983), 45; Finster and Schmidt (1994), 67; Schick (1995), 164; Green and Tsafirir (1982), 94–95.



Fig. 145. Mosaic in the church of St Stephen, Umm er-Rasas

Christians of the neighbouring regions of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf were probably following a similar strategy.⁶⁰⁰ It is also possible that there was no potential conflict to avoid and their artistic choices were founded on well-established traditions of the region, which happened to be in agreement with the attitude of the new ruling elite. In either case, hybridity of this art should be seen not as a random medley of heterogenic elements but as an effect of a consciously constructed repertoire of forms and motifs that would allow Christians to express their religious beliefs artistically but also adapt to the 'fluid'⁶⁰¹ realm of early Islamic Mesopotamia and the Gulf.

⁶⁰⁰ First to suggest that the lack of figural representations in art of Christians in the Sasanian realm was a 'willful renunciation' (bewußten Verzicht) was Stefan Hauser. Unfortunately, he has not developed a discussion on possible reasons of this renunciation, Hauser (2008), 49.

⁶⁰¹ The 'in flux' character of the Late Antique and Early Islamic society of the region has been presented, after Tannous, in Chapter 1. That the aniconic character of Christian stucco art in southern Mesopotamia was shaped by a particular political and cultural situation those Christians were functioning in rather than any 'inherent' attitude of the Eastern Syriac Christianity is confirmed by examples of figurative representations abundant in the art of the church of the East created under different rule and within different artistic context in the later period, see: Parry (1996).

7.2. The relation to Umayyad and Abbasid stucco production

It is puzzling that few comparative examples for the Christian material in question come from Bilad al-Sham, the only significant example being the similarity of stucco panels from al-Qusur to some decorations of the Umayyad palaces of Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi.⁶⁰² One would expect that there would be more common ground between works of art executed in the same medium in two regions located relatively close one to another.

A closer look into those Umayyad buildings reveals, however, that beside the close affinity of isolated motifs and compositions their overall decorations have little in common with Christian stuccoes of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. The focus of attention in the iconographic repertoire of Khirbat al-Mafjar is on the human and animal representation, which in itself is in contrast to decorative programmes under discussion in this thesis. The façade of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi is covered with stucco decoration in a *horror vacui* manner, very different from Christian decorations of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf which are limited either to particular architectural surfaces of friezes (Sir Bani Yas), panels (al-Qusur) or plaques (various Mesopotamian sites). Also the style of floral decorations of both Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi is much more naturalistic than comparable floral designs from Christian sites.⁶⁰³ The explanation of this phenomenon may be in conclusions drawn by Rina Talgam regarding the character of the early Umayyad sculpture:

(...) the sculpture at the large, central sites was based mainly on Byzantine models and works of local artists. The Sasanian influences there are of secondary importance and find expression mainly in the use of Sasanian motifs (...).⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰² See Chapter 5.

⁶⁰³ For an extensive presentation of Umayyad stuccoes from those and other sites see Talgam (2004).

⁶⁰⁴ Talgam (2004), 39.

Stuccoists working at sites such as Khirbat al-Mafjar were, therefore, essentially representing the Byzantine approach towards architectural decoration and for this reason their creations are formally very different from Christian stuccoes produced in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. Such an explanation seems to be supported by an isolated case of Qasr al-Kharanah, an early Umayyad desert castle. Its stucco decoration comprises mainly monumental *tondi* decorated with palmettes (Fig. 146). Even though they do not find direct parallels in Christian stuccoes in question, they share many formal features with them. The focus is on a particular motif, which – in contrast to the complicated and confusing compositions of the early Umayyad sculpture – is limited to a defined architectural space.⁶⁰⁵ The reason behind this formal similarity between Qasr al-Kharanah stuccoes and Christian stuccoes of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf is most probably due to the similar backgrounds of the artists involved. As Alastair Northedge has argued, artists working at Qasr al-Kharanah were of Iraqi origin and were familiar with the local tradition of stucco production.⁶⁰⁶ It has been demonstrated in this thesis that artists working at Christian sites in the region were also rooted in the Sasanian art.



Fig. 146. Stucco decoration from Qasr al-Kharanah

⁶⁰⁵ This has been already noticed by Urice (1987), 78–79. The scholar has argued that stuccoes from Qasr al-Kharanah find closest parallels in Iraqi and Iranian decorations, even though they do not belong to the Sasanian tradition and are dated to the Umayyad period.

⁶⁰⁶ Northedge (1992), 101.

The moment when Islamic stucco production started to build up more on the Sasanian tradition was the early Abbasid period.⁶⁰⁷ What emerges at that time in Islamic art are technological and stylistic developments that eventually led into the crystallization the so-called Samarra styles.⁶⁰⁸ They did not, however, bring closer Islamic and Christian stucco decorations as it is slightly earlier that the Christian production of stucco decorations in the region starts to cease to exist.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter the ability of Christian art of the region to transfer and transform distant – both chronologically and geographically – models was discussed. It seems that it was the same ability that allowed agents of this art to adjust to aniconic requirements – irrespective of who imposed them – without damage to the ability of this art to express religious notions and symbolic ideas. Even if the aniconism of Christian art of the region was, at least partially, due to Islamic attitude towards figural representation, the influence of Islamic art on Christian stucco production was rather limited. There were certainly some artistic relationships established between artists working for Muslim and Christian patrons (and it is also probable that the same people worked for both religious communities) but the influence of Islamic art on Christian stuccoes is in details, not in principles.

⁶⁰⁷ Herzfeld (1923), 6, 184.

⁶⁰⁸ See Herzfeld (1923) and Creswell (1940).

Discussion

The main aim of this thesis was to reconstruct the artistic landscape of Christian southern Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf by looking at sculptures and decorations executed in the most important material of this region – stucco. Even though the state of preservation of those stuccoes is often poor and despite the fact that there are many chronological gaps in the material discussed in this thesis, it is now possible to understand this landscape better. The most unexpected result of this study is the lack of an artistic centre (or centres) that would ‘radiate’ across the whole region in question and set artistic standards for stucco artisans working in more provincial parts of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. On the contrary, the evidence accumulated in the previous chapters shows that many of those artists were highly creative individuals who worked largely independently. It was especially the Gulf that constituted the essence of this phenomenon and stuccoes of southern Mesopotamia seem to have been more participant in the shared visual culture of eastern Christianity. Sometimes the products of this artistic freedom clearly stand out from the usual repertoire of motifs and forms and seem to appear ‘out of nowhere’. The best examples are crosses from Kharg that are characteristic for their very complicated and unusual forms and the palm trees tile-like decorations from Sir Bani Yas, for which no parallels anywhere in the region can be pointed out.

The lack of the centre-periphery dichotomy is therefore noticeable in the region and no influence from the main urban settlements of the region can be traced. It is especially surprising that we do not see any imitations of or works inspired by the relief created at the site that was very central to the Church of the East, that is Koke – to the extent that it is the only figural representation among decorations discussed in this thesis. The possible explanation is the chronological isolation of this work of art but a similar pattern is observable for the much later period. One would expect the politically, ecclesiastically and culturally important region of al-Hira to be a centre of artistic innovation in this landscape. It is symptomatic, however, that what was produced in this area were

relatively traditional and repetitive forms (portable plaques with crosses). Much more innovative forms occurred, as mentioned above, at much more isolated, less populated and – one would expect – culturally less influential sites located at islands of the Gulf. The reasons behind this regional differentiation remain obscure and should be addressed by future research.

However, the generally independent character of artisans working in the region did not prevent them from participating in the exchange of ideas, artistic trends and iconographic solutions with the wider world. The circulation of objects is confirmed by the case of an al-Qusur panel modeled on a type of portable plaques from Sir Bani Yas. It is also noticeable that stucco decorations created at neighbouring sites (al-Hira and 'Ain Sha'ia; al-Qusur and 'Akkaz) show close similarities. This may point to the fact that a single workshop worked at both of them. But it may also be a result of them being close enough one to another for patrons and artists to know and be inspired by artistic production of the neighbouring site, and it may further testify to the exchange of works of art and craft objects between particular Christian sites in the region.

Little can be said about workshops working at sites discussed in this thesis. The identity of artists and artisans remains obscure but it seems justified to suppose that in at least some cases they were not necessarily Christians and that their confessional identity was of little importance in comparison to expectations towards their skills. The author of the Koke relief, it seems, must have been trained in the Iranian tradition of monumental stone sculpture and as such could have been a non-Christian Sasanian, possibly a Zoroastrian. Interesting is also the case of artists involved in the production of al-Qusur panels. As has been discussed in Chapter 5, stylistic features of their work are very close to a group of stucco decorations from the palaces of Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi. Whether this means that they came from Bilad al-Sham or were trained there is impossible to determine but it certainly proves that artists working at Christian sites in the Gulf were not completely isolated from workshops operating in other regions of

the Middle East at that time, and that what mattered was their skills, which could have been used irrespective of the religious context.

The important feature of the region discussed in this thesis is that it comprised two distinctive subregions of southern Mesopotamia and of the Gulf. It has been demonstrated in Chapter 2 that there were profound differences between them in the level of creativity, the reliance on Byzantine and Sasanian patterns and the popularity of particular techniques. What they had in common – and what constitutes the Christian southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf as a coherent artistic region – was their capability for appropriating extraneous patterns and motifs for the artistic needs of their religious communities, thus creating new artistic repertoires. It is interesting to quote here words by Grabar regarding the popularity of stucco in early Islamic art:

Its cheapness made it a technique accessible to all, and it offers an interesting parallel to ceramics in that it could provide certain desired effects at any social level. Its flexibility allowed it to be used for a life-size sculpture in the round or for a minor repair to a broken capital. It lent itself to color. There was almost no end to the ways in which it could be used and transformed. The point here is not merely stucco's versatility, but also that it could be used both to introduce and try out newly imported designs and also to continue local themes and motifs. Thus throughout almost the entire history of Islamic art monuments with stucco decoration appear as museums of forms.⁶⁰⁹

Although he was referring in this fragment to Islamic art exclusively, it is striking how successfully it summarizes also our deliberations on Christian stuccoes and how accurate the phrase 'museum of forms' reflects the character of Christian art of the region. Why is it so? To a certain degree the flexibility and versatility of stucco in both the Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf and early Islamic art was a side effect of the relative unavailability of stone for carving. Stucco simply had to suffice as the material for monumental sculpture, architectural decoration and small portable plaques. But it seems that there might have been also a deeper motivation behind the choice of this particular material, the motivation that shaped both the Islamic and Christian artistic production in a similar way. Early Islamic art was certainly one 'in the making', just as

⁶⁰⁹ Grabar (1973), 194.

was early Islamic society. Its purpose was to express new political and religious ideas as well as to decorate newly erected buildings of types unknown to previous generations. It relied on earlier Sasanian, Byzantine and Arabian art and on many forms and techniques drawn directly from those traditions but it was meant to be neither Persian nor Roman nor restricted to the Arabian tradition. The innovation was a must and the result was the extreme creativity: the introduction of calligraphy as ornament, the creation of a completely new type of a religious building – a hypostyle mosque – the use of new techniques in ceramics, and more.⁶¹⁰ The similar quest for identity – also artistic, it seems – was undertaken by Christians living under the Sasanian Empire and the early Islamic caliphate. They were inspired by the Sasanian and Classical traditions as well as contemporary Islamic art but their artistic needs were certainly different than those of the Iranians, the Romans and Byzantines and the Muslims. Their identity was – probably even in comparison with early Islamic society – much more fluid and less sanctioned by formal institutions. Even though they existed within a formally established religious institution, they constituted a religious minority in the empire. Even though they successfully legitimized themselves as the subjects of the king of kings (and maybe even had seen themselves as Sasanians) as well as the caliph, they were certainly distinct from the Zoroastrian and Muslim majority. This lack of institutional support is especially clear for the Gulf where, after the mid-seventh century, the formal dependence on the Church of the East with the patriarch at Koke lost its importance to the local communities. This 'in the making' nature of social and artistic reality might have thus been what inclined both Muslims and Christians to use stucco – characteristic for its cheapness and versatility – in their artistic experiments.

A substantial part of this thesis has been dedicated to the two case studies, which have allowed us to understand better how stucco decorations functioned within architectural settings of churches and monastery complexes. In this attempt to set Christian stucco decoration of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf within the preceding and contemporary traditions of the region, it is important to compare the Christian approach

⁶¹⁰ See for example Grabar (1973), 206–213.

towards the relationship between architecture and its decoration with the Sasanian and the early Islamic understanding of the same issue. As has been explained neatly by Ignacio Arce:

In Sasanian architecture the actual structure of the building is thus concealed behind a decorative screen. This trend (concealing the architecture instead of bringing it out) is partly inherited by Umayyad architecture, although Roman-Byzantine influence makes the decoration somehow more articulated and related to the architectural structure underneath.⁶¹¹

The picture of Christian understanding of the relationship between architectural structure and stucco decoration as emerging from the al-Qusur and Sir Bani Yas case studies seems to be far from the Sasanian approach. The decoration of those two churches certainly does not have a 'total' and 'infinite' character and the architecture – albeit simple – is not hidden. On the contrary, it 'speaks' for itself' and exists independently from the decorative elements, and stucco decorations are limited to plaques, panels and friezes. It does not mean however, that the relationship between architecture and decoration in those two churches was 'classical' in a sense that the decoration followed the structure of the building and was subordinated to it. It seems, rather, that it was largely independent and that there was no defined structural relationship between architecture and its stuccoes. Plaques were possibly portable and just temporarily fixed at a certain position, for example above doorjambs. It is difficult to be sure of the original position of panels⁶¹² but their form makes them independent from any architectural background – they are complete works of art and do not require an architectural setting in order to be understood by the viewer. Similar is even the case of vine scroll friezes, especially Sir Bani Yas friezes of type 1. They did not decorate any structural element or highlight the articulation of the building. It is, rather, that the whole frieze was essentially a piece of decoration 'glued' to the elevation of the building above doorways. It is difficult to argue, therefore, for any consistent approach behind the coexistence of architecture and its stucco decoration in the region. It seems that

⁶¹¹ Arce (2001), 108.

⁶¹² See Chapter 4.

decorative programmes were created at particular sites in an *ad hoc* manner, according to local needs and aesthetics.

It has been stated in the introduction to this thesis that Christian stucco production, and art in general, of the region rarely enters the academic discourse. The impression is that it exists somewhere in between boundaries drawn by modern scholarship and belongs neither to Persian studies nor to Classical or Byzantine studies, nor is it a usual subject of interest of specialists in Early Islamic art. The reasons are certainly many and varied but one that I would like to consider here is the difficulty of framing this art within academic categories such as 'an epoch' or 'a culture'. In other words, how do we conceptualize this art academically?

One of the categories that could be useful for the purpose of conceptualizing art of Christians in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf in the sixth to the ninth centuries would be 'Late Antiquity'. During the last decades, scholarship has extended the chronological frames of 'Late Antiquity' and many academics now agree that the term is useful for describing cultural phenomena up to the year 800 or even 1000,⁶¹³ – which would allow us to include the period in question. Furthermore, some features that have been recognised in the scholarly literature as those of 'Late Antiquity' are certainly useful in describing characteristics of the society by which the objects of art under discussion were created. Among them are the co-existence of monotheist religions and constant changes of the ruling elite.⁶¹⁴ But other aspects of what is commonly described as 'Late Antiquity' require us to proceed with caution when applying this term to the region and time in question. As Andrea Giardina has pointed out, in determining boundaries of their field scholars of Late Antiquity should be aware of the nomenclature they use and of the fact that in the expression 'Late Antiquity' the adjective 'Late' serves just as a limitation

⁶¹³ Cameron (2013), xvi; Giardina (2013), 7.

⁶¹⁴ See for example Brown (1995), Cameron (2013), xxv–xxix.

of the word 'Antiquity'.⁶¹⁵ What this simple observation implies is that the phenomena classified as 'late antique' are rooted in Antiquity and that this is what primarily defines them. Consequently, they do not comprise phenomena characteristic for some isolated and self-contained period in history. In other words, according to Giardina, an idea, social movement, text or object can be 'late antique' only if it is 'antique' in the first place. Such an understanding of 'Late Antiquity' is indeed coherent with the origin of this term and this field of scholarship in research on the late classical Mediterranean. For example, the famous, fifth century bust of Eutropios falls into the category of the 'Late Antique sculpture' because of its generally 'Antique', ie classical, appearance modified by the 'Late' features (linearity, elongated proportions, big eyes).⁶¹⁶ The problem with applying a similar line of interpretation to the stuccoes discussed in this thesis is that we have simply no 'Antique' material to compare them with. Classical features and motifs occur in Christian stuccoes of the region but these are rather isolated cases and their existence certainly does not make those stuccoes rooted in Greco-Roman art. On the contrary, Christian art of the region in this period was essentially post-Sasanian, in a sense that it largely inherited techniques and the visual language of the Sasanian era. One could argue, therefore, that it was Sasanian art which was for the Christian art of southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf in this period the same as Roman art for Late Antique art of the Byzantine Empire. But what remains the main issue is that essentially 'Late Antiquity' in the Mediterranean is understood as a period of 'transition from classical past into medieval future' and even if one agrees that Sasanian art provides the 'classical past' for the Christian art in question, it is impossible to indicate 'the medieval future'. Christian stucco production in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf was a relatively constrained phenomenon. It appears certainly sometime in the sixth century (and possibly earlier but there is no evidence for that), gains its peak of popularity in the eighth century and dies out in the mid-ninth century. After that time, it is not only stuccoes but Christian art and architecture in general, that disappears. The reason was certainly the Islamization of the region. Already existing buildings were probably maintained and restored for decades

⁶¹⁵ Giardina (2013), p. 14; it is impossible to present here the vast discussion on the concept of 'Late Antiquity' and academic attempts to limit this period chronologically. For a concise overview of this and related issues see Cameron (2013), xv–xvii.

⁶¹⁶ Weitzmann (1979), 58.

to come but there was no need to build and decorate new ones. What proceeds in terms of stucco production are mainly the Abbasid stucco decorations with famous Samarra styles and their variations. But, as has been discussed in Chapter 7, they had very little in common with Christian stuccoes of the previous period and they could hardly be seen as a continuation or a development of the latter. In the Gulf, at least a century passed between the disappearance of Christian stucco tradition and stucco production that appears in the Abbasid period. The earliest site, from which stuccoes of the post-Christian period are known, is probably Jumeirah in Dubai. The settlement comprises a few residential buildings, a market, a 'caravanserai' and a mosque and it was occupied roughly from the tenth century onwards.⁶¹⁷ Although certain isolated motifs such as the 'diamond and almond' ornament are reminiscent of earlier Christian stuccoes, the majority of forms is very different in both iconography and style and it would be difficult to see them as a continuation of the earlier traditions of the region (Figs 147–148).

⁶¹⁷ The site was first excavated by professor D.T.C Baramki of the Archaeological Department of the American University of Beirut, and an Iraqi archaeological team in late 60s and 70s. In 1993–2001 excavations at the site were conducted by the team led by Dr Husain Al Qandil of the Dubai Museum. Results of those campaigns remain unpublished and no research has been conducted on stucco decorations. The present author visited the site and studied the collection of stuccoes briefly in Autumn 2016. Information here is based on unpublished archaeological documentation of the Architectural Heritage & Antiquities Department of the Dubai Municipality and personal communication with Dr Derek Kennet. For a short description of the site see also: Kennet (2011), 30. I would like to express my gratitude to the Director of the Mr Rashad Bukhash Architectural Heritage & Antiquities Department of the Dubai Municipality and his colleagues for their permission to study those stuccoes as well as facilitating and financing my visit to Dubai for this purpose.



Fig. 147. Stucco decoration from Jumeirah



Fig. 148. Stucco decoration from Jumeirah

Therefore, the only objects that could be seen as the continuation of Christian artistic production of the sixth-ninth centuries in greater Iran belong to the later Christian art of Central Asia, China and India that has been briefly discussed in Chapter 2. But – as has been already mentioned – this production was largely repetitive and it seems that it only echoed Mesopotamian forms.

In sum, 'Late Antiquity' is hardly a term that could be useful in understanding the Christian stucco production of the region up to the ninth century. Irrespective of academic categories, however, the scholarly conceptualization of this production should

be twofold. On the one hand, as transformative in relation to the earlier and contemporary artistic traditions, in which it was rooted; and on the other, of relatively small impact on the future art of the region.

The issue that remains to be discussed are the objectives and challenges for future research on this topic. One of the future possibilities is the use of archaeological science and the method of radiocarbon dating of stucco for determining further the chronology of stucco production in the region. Material analyses of the material would be also helpful in tracing a pattern of technological changes that might have occurred over the three centuries of the existence of Christian stucco production in southern Mesopotamia and the Gulf. The constant development of archaeology in the region, especially in the Gulf, allows one to hope for discoveries of new stucco decorations. Equally fruitful would be the possibility of conducting new research on the old but poorly published material. Of great importance for archaeologists and art historians as well as members of the public interested in the subject would be to see Christian stucco decorations of the region displayed – for the moment the only piece of the material studied in this thesis that is presented permanently in a museum is one of the panels from al-Qusur. It is encouraging that first attempts to make this material more accessible have been already undertaken and an example is the recent exhibition 'The Heritage of the Old Kings. Ctesiphon and the Persian Sources of Islamic Art' at the Museum für Islamische Kunst, at which the Koke relief has been displayed.⁶¹⁸ It is hope for the future that with the entry of Christian stuccoes produced in the region to the public discourse scholars will be encouraged more to study this unique material and that with the rise of academic interest Christian stuccoes will become more accessible for those interested in the subject.

⁶¹⁸ The exhibition was held in the museum between 15/11/2016 and 2/4/2017.

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