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The Physical and the Divine: Images of Inebriation in Medieval Islamic Art of the Umayyads From the 7th to the 11th Century

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THE PHYSICAL AND THE DIVINE: IMAGES OF INEBRIATION IN
MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ART OF THE Umayyads
FROM THE 7TH TO THE 11TH CENTURY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Leslie Anne Schepp
B.A., Centenary College of Louisiana, 2010
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This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful mother, Susan Schepp, who always inspired me to be my best self, who taught her children that failure is impossible if you have given your best, and whose tireless pursuit of education led me to do the same. Each day with you was an incredible blessing and each day without you is heartbreaking.

And to the next generation of Schepps, my nephews, Jacob and Luke. I hope we can encourage Susu's same love of learning and perseverance in you.

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ABSTRACT

The holy text of Islam, the Qur'an, frequently refers to wine both praising and condemning the substance. Within the confines of earth, wine is prohibited because of its intoxicating nature. Believers who imbibe wine reaching an inebriated state separate themselves from God by failing to heed his law. However, for those believers righteous enough to enter the ideal, pastoral, paradisiacal afterlife, wine is not only permitted, but a great reward from Allah. In Paradise, the righteous will lounge on soft, supple couches, and will be served copious amounts of wine from goblets of silver and glass by beautiful, immortal youths.

This description of Paradise provides an image of pleasures not typically afforded to believers of a religion that developed in an arid desert region. Both the religious and the secular realms of early Islamic art thus explore the act of wine drinking and the pleasures of Paradise. Religious Islamic art conveys the notion of Paradise as a means to attract converts to Islam who otherwise live in less than pleasurable conditions. Following an aniconic style, Islam's religious art illustrates the verses of the Qur'an, providing a visual image to believers of the fertile garden, promised by God awaiting them in the afterlife.

The secular realm of Islamic art also employs iconography referring to paradise, but does so by adopting and adapting themes of banqueting and luxury developed in early civilizations of the Near East by the ruling and elite classes as a means to demonstrate power and privilege. Through an analysis and comparison of pre-Islamic art of the Near East, as well as both the religious and secular realms of early Islamic art, this thesis explores the ways The Umayyad Caliphate employed an ancient iconography in order to secure the caliph's reign as successor to the previous empires of the Near East.

INTRODUCTION

Islam is a prohibitory religion thus, when we think of Islamic art, we do not expect images of drinking and of wine. Still, drinking and banqueting, in pleasure gardens in particular, has a millennia long history in the customs and the visual culture of the Near East. Examining these sources, it is clear that Islam adopted and adapted these themes in its writings and visual culture. This thesis will first trace the origins and context of these themes, then will discuss images of drinking and wine in the early Islamic religious and secular art. This chapter defines the geographic and temporal boundaries of Islamic art and its predecessors and presents its primary sources, both literary and visual.

A Brief History of the Rise of Islam and the Umayyad Caliphate

Though the Arabian Peninsula is in the midst of the Near East, where great empires and kingdoms ruled since the third millennium B.C.E., its geographic character, mostly dominated by a desert, isolated it both economically and culturally. At the time of Muhammad's birth, in the second half of the sixth century C.E., Arabs inhabiting Mecca and Medina lived primarily in nomadic tribes, relying on caravan trade across the peninsula rather than localized agricultural production and import and export trade.¹ At that point, the Byzantine and Sassanid Persian Empires dominated the Near East. By 502 C.E., peace between the Byzantine and Sassanid Persian Empires ended, leading to a series of wars. Because of this, significant trade routes throughout the Arabian Peninsula were disrupted and the small city of Mecca emerged as a new trade route and commercial center. Under the newly settled Quraysh tribe, the merchants of Mecca traded with the Byzantines and the Sassanid Persians, introducing luxury goods and

¹ C.E. Bosworth, "The Historical Background of Islamic Civilization," *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*, ed. R.M. Savory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 15.

political ideals from these civilizations.² It was during this influx of new ideas, commodities, and lenient public authority that the Prophet Muhammad was born.

Islam emerged as a new religion in the city of Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad's birthplace. Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh tribe yet, according to biographers, his early life was fraught with hardship as a poor orphan whose wealth and position was only altered after marrying the widow of a rich merchant.³ Because the Qur'an incorporates stories from both the Jewish and Christian faith, Muhammad is believed to have been acquainted with both Jews and Christians, most likely via traders and travelers. It was on one of these trading excursions that Muhammad, around the age of forty, is said to have wandered into a cave to pray. There he was visited by the archangel Gabriel and received the first revelation from Allah. From this moment, Muhammad began to preach in Mecca, converting the lower classes from the polytheism of the Quraysh tribe's elite to the monotheism of Islam. As a wealthy commercial center, the elite classes began to fear opposition from Muhammad's new followers. Persecution of the new faith ensued and Muhammad fled to Yathrib, a town 280 miles north of Mecca.⁴ Referred to as the Hijra, Muhammad and his followers migrated to Medina in 622 C.E., marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Muhammad entered Medina, not as a persecuted fugitive, but as the leader of a socially disciplined community. By 624 C.E., in an effort to return to and convert the city of Mecca, Muhammad and his followers attacked a caravan en route to the commercial center. This raid provided Medina with a bounty sufficient enough to economically stabilize the community while denying Mecca of sustenance. This first attack on the Meccans

² Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 29-31.

³Ibid, 34-35.

⁴ Ibid, 36-37. Yathrib was renamed Medina meaning City of the Prophet

led to a continuation of animosity between the Quraysh tribe and the new faith until Muhammad conquered Mecca in 630 C.E. with a army of 10,000.⁵

Muhammad died of a short illness in 632 C.E. leaving behind a new monotheist religion in a predominantly pagan region. However, in his absence, Muhammad left no plan of succession or distribution of authority in the wake of an infant Muslim community. In order to maintain continuity, Muhammad's closest confidant, Abū Bakr, was chosen as the first caliph. As the final prophet and religious representative of Allah on earth, a religious authority on earth ceased to exist after Muhammad's death. Political power, however passed to and was concentrated in one man, the caliph. Religious authority was maintained via the Prophet's closest acquaintances and scholars; those who accompanied him and recorded his teachings became the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān. Thus, the unity between religious and political authority was preserved and shaped the earliest caliphates of Islam.⁶

Under a new form of political authority, the caliph now possessed an army and ruled not just a small community of Muslims, but an entire region. His objective in order to maintain his new authority was conquest and conversion, expanding into Byzantine and Sassanid Persian territories and eventually occupying Syria, Iraq, and Egypt.⁷ In 661 C.E. Syrian governor Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, founded the Umayyad Caliphate and adopted the title "khalīfat Allah" as a means to legitimize conquests and the political and religious authority of the new caliphate. Khalīfat Allah, meaning deputy of God, was intended to designate the new caliph as Muhammad's divinely appointed successor, implying strong claim as the religious authority of

⁵ Ibid, 43-44.

⁶ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 2.

⁷ Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 51-53.

Islam.⁸ In addition to moving the administration from Mecca to Syria, Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan transformed the Caliphate into a Arab monarchy led by the dominant Arab tribes. It was with this transformation that Islam was no longer led by a religious leader preaching to converted lower classes, but was dominated by a political authority influenced by the appeal of kingships and court cultures.

As early as 711 C.E., an army of Berbers and Arabs united by the Umayyad Caliphate conquered nearly all of the Iberian Peninsula, establishing a local government in Córdoba.⁹ These Spanish Umayyad territories were governed from Damascus until 750 C.E., when the caliphate was overthrown by the Abbasids. The only surviving member of the Umayyad family, Abd al-Rahman I, escaped Abbasid assassins, fled to Al-Andalus, declared himself Emir and established his capital at Córdoba. By 929 C.E., Abd al-Rahman III restored the Umayyad Caliphate. Under the reign of Abd al-Rahman III, the visual culture of the Umayyad's reached its zenith. The palace city at Madīnat al-Zahrā' set the standard for luxurious court culture defining kingship through its opulence and patronage.¹⁰ Decorated in rich fabrics, ornately carved marble capitals and fountains, Madīnat al-Zahrā' set the standard of artistic taste and palatial extravagance. It was under the reestablished Umayyad Caliphate that al-Andalus became a great manufacturer of luxury goods traded as far as India.¹¹ These items included silks, fragrances, boxes carved of ivory, and objects cast in expensive metals. The Umayyad Caliphate in Spain, ruling from 929-1031 C.E., created a new cultural center for Islam. In addition to its

⁸ Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph*, 4-5.

⁹ *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilyn D. Dodds (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1992) xxix.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Oleg Grabar, "Islamic Spain, the First Four Centuries," *Al-Andalus: Art of Islamic Spain* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc, 1992) 3.

art and luxury goods, an interest in philosophy, science, and poetry was introduced to the Iberian Peninsula.

The temporal and geographical boundaries of this thesis are the boundaries of the Early Islamic period, the period from the rise of Islam in the seventh century to the end of the Umayyad caliphate in 1031 C.E., from the Middle East to Spain. The centers of artistic production coincide with the centers of political power, as it shifted from the east to the west: Damascus in the beginning and Córdoba and Madīnat al-Zahrā' in the end.

The Art and Architecture of the Umayyads: the archaeological record

In order to further solidify the position as Allah's chosen religious authority on earth, the Umayyad caliph, as well as his successors, initiated a grand building program that included both religious and secular buildings.

The earliest examples of religious buildings are found in Jerusalem and Damascus. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built as a shrine, served as an alternate pilgrimage site to the Kaaba in Mecca during a civil war between the two governing bodies of Mecca and Damascus to determine whether legitimate power presided in Mecca or Damascus. Because Muslims living in Damascus could not make the journey to Mecca during the fighting, the Dome of the Rock was erected to assuage the agitation of the city's inhabitants. The extravagance paid to the interior mosaics of the building was intended to both pacify Abd al-Malik's subjects and introduce Jerusalem as a religious and cultural center while exhibiting the wealth and righteousness of the Umayyad Caliphate.

The Great Mosque of Damascus, commissioned by Abd al-Malik's son and successor, al-Walid I, borrowed from the traditions of Roman imperial architecture and used Byzantine

artisans to complete the mosaic decoration of the building's exterior, which is in the same vein as the Dome of the Rock. The architecture and architectural decoration was intended to establish the power of Damascus, the new Umayyad capital, over Mecca while demonstrating power and piety.

In addition to the religious building of early Islam, there exists an extensive oeuvre of secular buildings and art throughout the early Umayyad Caliphate in Syria and the caliphate's continuation in Spain. Of these buildings and objects, this thesis explores the desert palaces in Syria including, 1) Qasr Mshatta, 2) Khirbat al-Mafjar, 3) Qasr Amra, and the building remains and objects created at 4) Madīnat al-Zahrā', the Umayyad palace city of Córdoba.

The Literary Sources

The main literary sources that help us understand and evaluate early Islamic art and iconography are the Qur'an and the Hadith, the spiritual texts of Islam, and Khamriyya, the wine poetry of the region. The Qur'an is the holy book of Islam and is considered to be authored by Allah and proclaimed by Muhammad. Muhammad received the content of the Qur'an from the archangel Gabriel and was then instructed to, in obedience to Allah, proclaim the Message to his fellow Arabs and to the world.¹² The Qur'an provides a history of the creation, Muhammad's narrative as Allah's Prophet, the ways in which Muslims must obey God, and a believers ultimate reward—Paradise. The Hadith is a collection of Muhammad's teachings recorded by his closest acquaintances and disciples who ultimately became the first caliphs following the Prophet's death. The Hadith, though not considered to be a holy book authored by Allah, aids in the interpretation of the Qur'an and is considered Islamic law. Meant to serve as guidance for the

¹² Walter H. Wagner, *Opening the Qur'an* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 17.

ways in which Muslims should conduct their lives, the Hadith records that which Muhammad said and did, his behavior on earth and his expectations for his followers.¹³ The Hadith provides an interpretation of the ways to obey Allah such as how to dress, what to eat and drink, why gambling is forbidden, and other such regulations. The *khamriyya* is the extensive collection of secular, Arabic wine poetry written prior to the development of Islam. These poems describe the joys of banqueting, the inebriating effects of wine, the love of wine in the region. Though Muhammad banned wine drinking in the early stages of Islam, poets continued to write on the joys of drinking going so far as to accept the rejection of Allah and Paradise in order to enjoy wine on earth. These texts provide insight into the expectations of Muslims and their obedience to Allah as well as an indication of a continuation of drinking culture even after Muhammad's ban on the substance.

Contribution of the Thesis

This thesis argues that the Umayyad ruling elite adopted the customs and visual history of the Near East, first to legitimize both their religious and secular power, via borrowed iconography left behind by the by former controlling empires of the region, second to illustrate the opulence of Allah's paradisiacal reward reserved only for the righteous, and lastly to imply that Allah's salvation is achieved only through allegiance to the caliph. Within this visual history, there exists both a religious and a secular realm mimicking the religious and political authority of the caliph himself. Within these two realms, Islamic art conveys the notion of paradise whether it be on earth or in the afterlife, as a means to attract converts to Islam. Rather than maintain Islam's authority via the verses of the Qur'an and the recordings of the Hadith, the

¹³ Aisha Y. Musa, *Hadith as Scripture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) 1.

Umayyad elite chose to adopt a visual history left behind by the Sumerians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Hellenistic Greeks, Romans, Late Antique Byzantines and the Sasanian Persians, in which the divinely appointed enjoy the indulgences of banqueting, including partaking in a substance strictly condemned by the Qur'an on earth and reserved only for the righteous in Allah's paradise—wine.

This thesis demonstrate the ways in which the Umayyad ruling elite, even under the restrictions of the so-called divine revelations of Allah—the Qur'an—sought to legitimize their presence and political authority over both Syria and Spain by imitating the visual heritage and opulent court culture of this region's former civilizations.

Outline of the Thesis

The following chapter explores the cultural heritage of the pre-islamic Near East, from the third millennium B.C.E. till the sixth century C.E. Images of banqueting and drinking as well as depictions of and notions of the afterlife are examined to determine the degree to which they served as precedents for Islamic art. The third chapter analyzes the literary sources of Islam, including the Qur'an, the Hadith, and Khamriyya, or wine poetry of the region. Chapter four presents a corpus of religious and secular Umayyad art in both Syria and Spain, and finally the epilogue demonstrates the ways in which the Umayyad's adaptation of their precedents continued into the succeeding Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphates and were ultimately continued by the Norman Kingdom of Sicily.

CHAPTER 1: DRINKING IN PRE-ISLAMIC NEAR EAST

In this chapter, I examine the importance of alcoholic beverages and banqueting in the Near East from the beginnings of the first civilization that developed there—the Sumerians in the third millennium—until the rise of Islam. Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, Achaemenid Persia, Hellenistic Kingdoms, and the Roman Empire to Late Antiquity are discussed separately to highlight the continuity in the culture of the Near East as it developed over three and a half millennia and was ultimately adopted and adapted by Islam in the seventh century C.E.

Sumer

The Sumerians were one of the first settled societies to emerge, developing organized city-states. The development of writing has been attributed to the Sumerians and, significant to this thesis, beer. Early Sumerian city-states developed around temples; the priests of these temples had all the power as they were able to communicate with the capricious and fierce gods. However, by the Early Dynastic Period of the third millennium, the social order shifted and with it the authority over the people of Sumeria. Temples were replaced with palaces and priests with divinely appointed kings who declared themselves chief-priest. Thus the ruling elite took on a quasi-religious position which ultimately continued throughout the Near East.

The rise of beer production and consumption corresponds with the rise of Sumerian civilization, thus beer drinking was essentially viewed as an indication of enlightenment.¹⁴

Though beer was consumed as a dietary staple, artifacts from the second millennium B.C.E.

¹⁴ *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to illustrate his point, in which Enkidu, a wild, naked man familiar with the wilderness who drinks water with the cattle is introduced to beer by the harlot Shamhat. Shamhat commands Enkidu to “Drink the beer: the destiny of the land,” and after drinking seven whole jars he “relaxed, felt joyful/His heart rejoiced/His face beamed/...And he became like any man.” Tom Standage, *A History of the World in 6 Glasses* (New York: Walker and Company, 2005) 26-27.

reveal the use of such a beverage for social and religious banquets, held at celebrations of births or deaths, and as commemorations of important events such as the building of a temple and the victorious return from war and as symbols of affluence and status. Though the earliest form of wine or beer was largely consumed by the masses, alcohol quickly became a luxury good that divided society into classes, as is evident in the banquet iconography and costly vessels left behind not only in the tombs of the wealthy and the elite, but as plaques which appear on the walls of temples as commemorative stele. Though the Sumerians had access to wine and it was certainly a popular substance among the elite, it is unlikely that the early cultivation of wine occurred in this part of Mesopotamia. Instead, wine and eventually grape vines were traded between Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Levant in the fourth millennium, providing access to valuable luxury goods like lapis lazuli, gold, and silver.¹⁵ Thus, imported wine and wine storage or drinking vessels made from rare precious materials further differentiated the elite and the lower classes.

Sumerian art reflects this social differentiation. Images of drinking and banqueting were associated early on with the elite and deployed to commemorate important achievements. The earliest evidence comes from the votive plaques installed on temple walls as a means to memorialize the shrine's patron. Carved from limestone and divided into registers depicting narrative scenes, these slabs were fastened to the wall via stone nails inserted through the central hole.

One of these plaques, found in the temple in Khafajah, depicts a typical banquet scene (Figure 1). In the upper register, two seated banqueters raise cups in one hand, as if they are

¹⁵ Alexander H. Joffe, "Alcohol and Social Complexity in Ancient Western Asia," 302.

about to drink, and hold leaves in the other. Two attendants stand between them, one carries an animal on his head, while the other reaches towards the seated man. A third attendant stands behind the female. In the middle register, five figures carry food and drink. In the bottom register is a musician playing a harp and two figures possibly singing or dancing.



Figure 1 Wall Plaque with Banqueters and Musicians, Limestone, Mesopotamia, Khafajah, Sin Temple, ca. 2550-2400 B.C.E, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Plaques such as this one, depicting scenes of celebration, were likely dedicated by the figures represented here as sponsors of a festival. The leaves held by the figures, as well as the procession of bountiful foodstuffs, suggest a celebration of agricultural fertility perhaps tied to the harvest season.¹⁶ The term banquet literally meant “a place of beer and bread,” and was observed as a means to celebrate within both a religious and a social context. The royal banquet demonstrated the symbolic nature of the ruler as divine—the abundance of the banquet was an indication of the ruler as the source of nature’s fecundity.¹⁷

¹⁶ Donald P. Hansen, “Art of the Early City States,” *Art of the First Cities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 31.

¹⁷ Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 158-159.

A second votive plaque, also from the Early Dynastic period of Mesopotamia, depicts Ur-Nanshe, the founder and king of the first dynasty of Lagash (Figure 2). Divided into two registers, Ur-Nanshe's status is cemented via his large size, his ornate woolen skirt, and the accompanying cuneiform inscription which reads, "Ur-Nanshe, King of Lagash, son of Gunidu, built the temple of Ningirsu; he built the temple of Nanshe, he built Apsubandu."¹⁸ Represented twice on the plaque, Ur-Nanshe is portrayed as both chief-priest and king. On the left, he stands with a basket of bricks on his head to help build the shrine. He is accompanied by his wife, identified by her long hair and similar skirt, and his four sons. In the lower register, Ur-Nanshe is shown enthroned and banqueting, a goblet in hand, celebrating the building of the temple. Ur-Nanshe's portrayal as both king and builder illustrate the important role of Sumerian rulers as a divine entity whose role as builder and protector of the religious realm is venerated.



Figure 2 Votive Relief of Ur-Nanshe, King of Lagash, Limestone, Ancient Girsu, ca. 2550-2500 B.C.E, Louvre Museum.

¹⁸ Ibid.

The theme of banqueting also appears in a unique luxury artifact found in the Royal Tombs of Ur, the so-called Standard of Ur (Figure 3), here associated with war-related achievements. Perhaps originally part of furniture, multi-registered and covered in a mosaic of lapis lazuli and shell, the Standard of Ur depicts scenes of both peace and war. Peace is illustrated by the king sitting before his court at a feast, goblets in every hand, accompanied by servants and musicians. In the two registers below the king, attendants are depicted carrying spoils (presumably from the victorious war depicted on the obverse) for the banquet. The king, distinguishable by his great stature, is portrayed as both a ruler-warrior and a divine entity worthy of offerings and responsible for the abundance of his territory.¹⁹ While beer was produced for and by the masses, grape vines and fruit trees reserved for wine making were



Figure 3 The Standard of Ur, shell, lapis lazuli, and red limestone, from Ur, southern Iraq, 2600-2400 B.C.E., British Museum, London.

grown not as part of the typical agriculture of Sumer, but within walled gardens often enclosed in temples.²⁰ As a city-state centered around the temples and the chief priests poised to placate the

¹⁹ Donal P. Hansen, "Art of the Royal Tombs of Ur: A Brief Interpretation," *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*, ed. Richard L. Zetter and Lee Horne (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, 47.

²⁰ Patrick E. McGovern, *Ancient Wine: The Search for the Origins of Viniculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 150.

gods, this early veneration of wine and its revered position as a substance created within temple walls demonstrates that from its earliest inception it was a divine substance.

The seal of Puabi, a cylinder seal found at the Royal Cemetery at Ur, in the tomb of Queen Puabi, further illustrates the prestige of banqueting in two registers (Figure 4). In the top register, two seated figures, presumably a man on the right and a woman on the left, flank a large jug of beer. The figures drink the substance from long tubes or straws. On either side of them there is a repeating pattern of coupled figures—on the right a member of the elite class is seated with a glass of wine or beer in hand, and on the left, an attendant stands holding a flagon of the same drink in service to the elite.²¹ The cylinder seal, carved of lapis lazuli—an expensive and exotic material—typically identified its owner and was acquired by members of the upper class as a form of regalia indicating status, wealth, and, often, their office within the ruling elite.²² Accompanying the cylinder seal of Queen Puabi, drinking vessels and objects of prized materials were uncovered, including: a fluted, gold drinking cup, with a zig zag pattern at the top, and a hollow handle to use as a straw (Figure 5). Also at the site were a shallow, smooth, gold cup (Figure 6); and a drinking straw of silver and gold, wrapped in lapis lazuli.

²¹ A banquet scene indicated the seal likely belonged to a women, while a man's seal would feature a war scene.

²² Holly Pittman, "Cylinder Seals," *Treasures from the Royal Tombs of Ur*, ed. Richard L. Zetter and Lee Horne (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, 77-78.



Figure 4 Lapis Lazuli Cylinder Seal and modern impression, 2600 B.C.E., from Ur, southern Iraq, British Museum, London.



Figure 5 Gold Cup, 2600-2400 B.C.E., hammered gold, from Ur, southern Iraq, British Museum, London.



Figure 6 Gold Bowl, 2600-2400 B.C.E., hammered gold, from Ur, Southern Iraq, British Museum, London.

Situated between Queen Puabi's grave and her husband's, the king, was what archeologist and excavator Leonard Woolley labeled a death pit. The bodies of nine women, identified as "court ladies," dressed in ornate jewels—pendants, earrings, and headdresses of gold and lapis lazuli—leaned against the walls of the death pit, a wooden harp in close vicinity.²³ The queen or king's tombs, furnished with numerous vessels for food and drink as well as the dressed corpses of their attendants, were set for a banquet. According to Woolly, after the body of the king or queen was interred, a procession followed of:

the members of the dead ruler's court, soldiers, men-servants, and women, the latter in all their finery of brightly-colored garments and headdresses of carnelian and lapis lazuli, silver and gold, officers with the insignia of their rank, musicians bearing harps or lyres...Each man or woman brought a little cup of clay or stone or metal, the only equipment needed for the rite to follow...then each of them drank from their cups... and lay down and composed themselves for death.²⁴

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* gives an image of the Sumerian's views on the afterlife as a dismal and dark place of no return. A place in which no light shines, thirst is left unquenched, and hunger unsatisfied, the only drink or food available is dust and clay.²⁵ To combat such a bleak view, the royal and wealthy in life mimicked the extravagance and splendor of their earthly banquets in a burial context. Dressing themselves and their attendants in luxurious fabrics and

²³ Sir Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of 12 Years Work by Sir Leonard Woolley* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965) 64.

²⁴ Ibid, 69-70.

²⁵ *Epic of Gilgamesh* tablet VII :
He led me down to the House of Darkness,
the dwelling of Irkalla,
to the house where those who enter do not come out,
along the road of no return,
to the house where those who dwell, do without light,
where dirt is their drink, their food is of clay,
where, like a bird, they wear garments of feathers,
and light cannot be seen, they dwell in the dark,
and upon the door and bolt, there lies dust.

jewels, their soldiers in armor and weaponry, and stockpiling to fill their tombs with costly and valuable items in the hopes that their soldiers offered protection, their vessels held enough to drink, and their jewels were gifts pleasing enough to the gods to provide safe passage and a luxurious stay, these tombs were prepared as a banquet.²⁶ The fear of the afterlife implored the elite to acquire and store plentiful supplies to demonstrate their status to the gods in an attempt to ensure a more pleasurable afterlife.

Egypt

Beer and wine were also central in the Egyptian civilization. Unlike the Sumerians, the Egyptians believed that the afterlife, or Aaru, was a continuation of their lives on earth.²⁷ Therefore they had to secure that the same continuous supply of commodities, including beer and wine, would be available to them in their afterlife. Similar to the banquets prepared in the tombs of Sumerian royalty, Egyptian tombs were illustrated with frescoes depicting scenes of feasting.

Because the afterlife was anticipated to be similar to the extravagance experienced by the upper classes on earth, Egyptians were typically depicted on the walls of their tombs engaging in leisure and decadence. A comprehensive depiction of the joys of the afterlife are found in the tomb of Nebamun, the grain accountant of Thebes, dating to the New Kingdom (ca. 1550-1295 B.C.E.). The outer room of Nebamun's tomb chapel features a depiction of Nebamun and his wife seated before a table heaped with offerings of bread, grapes, figs, and roasted fowl, all items only available to the wealthy. Below the table, large jars of wine are decorated with garlands of vines and grapes (Figure 7). The hieroglyphs accompanying the figures read, "Sitting in a booth,

²⁶ Sir Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, 65.

²⁷ Jani Nāhri, "Beautiful Reflections: The Cognitive and Evolutionary Foundations of Paradise Representations," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no.4 (2008), 343.

enjoying himself in his *mansion of vindication*.’’²⁸ While the hieroglyphs failed to denote the meaning of mansion of vindication, one can assume it refers to the luxurious dwelling afforded to Nebamun, justified by the good he did on earth as the grain accountant to the pharaoh.



Figure 8 A Feast for Nebamun, outer room tomb-chapel of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt, c. 1350 BC, British Museum.



Figure 9 A Feast for Nebamun, lower half of a scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt, c. 1350 BC, British Museum.



Figure 7 Offering for Nebamun, fragment of a scene from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c.1350 B.C.E., from Thebes, Egypt, British Museum.

His deeds in turn justify his reward. To the right of the offerings fresco is an image of the banquet. The scene is divided in half each with two registers. Nebamun and his wife, now lost, sit to the left of the party. In the upper half of the fresco (Figure 8), Nebamun's friends and relatives are attended by naked serving girls. Below the guests, musicians play as naked girls dance, beside them large jars of wine are again decorated with vines and flowers. In the lower half of the fresco guests sit before a table covered in food and drink, servants weave between guests offering libations (Figure 9). The guests are elaborately clothed from head to foot and partake of a succulent dinner and intoxicating and euphoric beverages. This banquet illustrates the utopian bliss enjoyed by Nebamun for eternity.

The most significant image of Aaru within Nebamun's tomb is the garden fresco located in the inner room of the tomb-chapel (Figure 10). In the center of the garden is a pool filled with birds, fish, and lotus flowers; surrounding the pool, fruit trees in various stages of bloom, to the

right of the garden a woman holds a jar of wine and a cluster of figs or grapes. This depiction of a heavenly garden is not unlike the extant earthly palace gardens from this period, yet its presence within the inner room of Nebamun's tomb-chapel conveys the Egyptian interpretation of the afterlife as a peaceful palace garden in an ideal world and the festivals, extravagance, and leisures afforded to the elite class. The depictions on the walls of Nebamun's tombs reference banquets and gardens on earth as the exact design of the afterlife. It is in these chapel tomb fresco that wine is introduced as a recognized benefit of the afterlife.



Figure 10 Nebamun's Garden, Inner room tomb-chapel of Nebamun, c. 1350 B.C.E., from Thebes, Egypt, British Museum.

The Assyrian Empire

At the turn of the second to the first millennium B.C.E., Mesopotamia and later Egypt came under Assyrian rule. The Assyrians were a warrior state whose survival was based on

pillaging their adversaries' lands.²⁹ The most common images associated with the Assyrian empire are those of battle and brutal conquest, merciless execution, and barbarous scenes of hunting, which decorated their palaces. This iconography exhibited the strength and ferocity of the Assyrians while securing the warrior-king title of their divine ruler.

In addition to the savagely themed low-reliefs of the palace walls, a method of architectural decoration first employed under Ashurnasirpal II, few depictions exist presenting



Figure 11 Ashurnasirpal Enthroned, Nimrud, northern Iraq, 883-859 B.C.E., British Museum, London.

the king not as a warrior but as a divine being. Found in what was possibly a large audience hall of Ashurnasirpal II's palace at Nimrud, a relief depicting the king and his court or attendants confirm his status as both a warrior king and divinity (Figure 11). The king is seated in the center and has his hand raised holding a cup or bowl as if he is about to drink, perhaps mid-

²⁹ Holly Pittman, *Assyrian Reliefs and Ivories in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980) 8.

ritual. This signifies his role as spiritual leader and the chief priest of Assur.³⁰ Two eunuchs stand on either side of the king, holding fly whisks, a ladle, and the king's weapons—a quiver and bow. To the far left of the relief stands a winged god holding a bucket and raising his right hand gesturing towards the king, implying a blessing from the winged figure. Because of its location within an audience hall, a room of the palace in which Ashurnasirpal would both greet his subjects and lead in rituals, the image demonstrates his authority over two realms. Additionally, the inscriptions carved in the stone reliefs support Ashurnasirpal's position as



Figure 12 Garden Relief, Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, 669-631 B.C.E., British Museum, London.

divine warrior king, declaring his status as “chief priest of Assur, the chosen one of Enil and Ninurta, the favorite of Anu and Dagan, the divine weapon of the Great Gods, the potent king,

³⁰ Ibid, 21.

the king of the world, the king of Assyria.”³¹ Thus, the message that Ashurnasirpal is both the warrior-king and divine spiritual leader who commands both the people and the Assyrian gods is conveyed both verbally through the inscription and visually through the subject and iconography of drinking in the presence of deities.

The subject of drinking and banqueting recurs in the panel decoration of the private apartment of King Ashurbanipal at the palace of Nineveh to communicate the theme of leisure and privilege. Unlike the stiff and ritualistic aspects of his predecessor’s relief, Ashurbanipal is depicted reclining in a garden with the queen seated on a chair in front of him (Figure 12). Both have cups of wine in hand and are shaded by the trees of the garden and a vine hanging overhead. Attendants carry fly whisks and refreshments for the king and queen and a harpist entertains the two. Though the king is in the midst of relaxation, the head of the defeated Elamite king hangs in a tree to the left illustrating the ferocity of Ashurbanipal even in times of leisure. The relief is a rare depiction of the pleasures and privileges enjoyed by the Assyrian royalty in life: an idyllic garden within the confines of his earthly palace.

The Achaemenid Persian Empire

Led by Cyrus the Great, who rose to power in 559 B.C.E., the Achaemenid Persians overthrew the Assyrians and expanded their territory from southwest Iran to cover the entire Near East, the Indus River Valley, Egypt, and Asia Minor.³² Becoming the largest empire in

³¹ Ibid, 32. Emphasis added. The inscriptions also describe the strength and courage of Ashurnasirpal as well as the deserved palace he built for himself and his leisure.

“I am Ashurnasirpal, the obedient prince, the worshipper of the Great Gods...the king of rulers, who tames dangerous enemies, the one crowned with glory, the one unafraid of battle, the king deserving of praise. I built thereon a palace with halls of cedar, cypress, juniper, bow-wood, teak, terebinth, and tamarisk as my royal dwelling and for the enduring leisure life of my lordship.”

³² Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 267-268.

ancient history, the Achaemenid's influence and reign continued for nearly two hundred years from 550 to 330 B.C.E. Though the empire encompassed several regions, it was the first to acknowledge the various belief systems, languages, and customs of its newly conquered inhabitants.³³ To demonstrate their tolerance of as well as encourage continuation of various religious beliefs and spoken languages, inscriptions were often multilingual and rituals and customs incorporated into Persian culture. Cyrus the Great, for instance, took up the role of Babylonian king after the conquest of Babylon. Cyrus participated in religious rituals and even declared his reign as appointed by the patron god of the city, Marduk.³⁴ Unfortunately, this leniency within the Persian empire which, in addition to adopting customs, allowed conquered kingdoms to keep their kings and elites in exchange for taxes, led to the eventual defeat of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C.E.

For the scope of this thesis, perhaps the most notable custom adopted and adapted by Cyrus the Great was the banquet and its eventual setting. The Achaemenid Persians, who conquered the Assyrians, adopted feasting as a means to demonstrate wealth and elite status. As seen in the Assyrian relief at Nineveh (figure 12), the Assyrian notion of privilege and pleasure took place not within the palace halls, but the garden. Upon building his palace in the Persian capital Pasargadae, Cyrus the Great adapted the Assyrian garden as the prestigious emblem of kingship.³⁵ The word paradise, in fact, comes from the Old Persian word *pairidaêza* meaning

³³ Ibid, 274.

³⁴ Ibid, 276. Found on the Cyrus Cylinder currently held at the British Museum, Cyrus declared himself King of Babylon following Marduk's anger towards the last Babylonian king Nabonidus. "Marduk turned upon the inhabitants that were abandoned...and had mercy upon them. He examined and checked the entirety of the lands, all of them, he searched everywhere and then he took a righteous king, his favorite, by the hand, he called out his name: Cyrus; he pronounced his name to be king all over the world."

³⁵ David Stronach, "The Garden as a Political Statement: Some Case Studies from the Near East in the First Millennium B.C., *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 4 (1990) 177.

walled garden.³⁶ Cyrus the Great, the first to employ a grandiose idea of a walled garden, a “paradise” on earth, constructed a monumental and symmetrical royal garden complete with pavilions for shade and repose, deep pools and channels to funnel water throughout, and abundant fruit and vegetation.³⁷ Though enclosed palace gardens were built and enjoyed by rulers prior to the Achaemenid Persians, the schematics of the royal garden at Pasargadae became the archetype for future royal gardens.

In ancient literary sources, the king’s dinner is described as an incredibly elaborate and sumptuous affair for which over a thousand animals are slaughtered, prepared by a staff of 79, and served on silver utensils nearing 97 percent pure.³⁸ Perhaps the most interesting and most frequently illustrated of these customs was the Persian love of wine. The Biblical book of Esther recounts a feast given in honor of the Persian King Xerxes I (519-465 B.C.E.) in the third year of his reign. Held at Susa for the nobles, officials, and army of Persia, the feast “displayed the glorious wealth of his kingdom, and the magnificent splendor of his greatness for a total of 180 days.”³⁹ A description of the garden paradise in which the banquet was held follows, “white and violet linen hanging were fastened with fine white and purple linen cords to silver rods on marble columns. Gold and silver couches were arranged on a mosaic pavement of red feldspar, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stones.”⁴⁰ Finally, the book reveals not the cuisine that was served, but the wine, stating:

³⁶ Richard P. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2000) 263.

³⁷ David Stronach, *Pasargadae: A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961 to 1963*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) 107.

³⁸ Elspeth R. M. Dusinberre, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 117-119.

³⁹ Esther 1:4, Holman Christian Standard Bible.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 1:6.

beverages were served in an array of gold goblets, each with a different design. Royal wine flowed freely, according to the king's bounty and no restraint was placed on the drinking. The king had ordered every wine steward in his household to serve as much as each person wanted.⁴¹

Though the mention that the king feasted for 180 days is in all likelihood an exaggeration, this text describes the extravagance of the Persian feast. The book of Esther places importance on both the wine and the vessels in which it was served as a means to demonstrate the wealth and indulgence of Xerxes I. Herodotus, "the father of history," a Greek living in Persian-ruled Anatolia, tells more of the Persian practices concerning wine:

They are very fond of wine, but [drinking] is not done to vomit or pee when anyone else is looking. Before discussing anything really serious, it is normal for everyone to get drunk; then next morning when they have all slept it off, the man in whose house they are holding the meeting tells them the decision they took while under the influence of drink; and if it still looks right, now that they are sober, it is approved, otherwise not. If they first discuss a subject when sober, they get drunk afterwards and argue it all out again.⁴²

Though it sounds as if Persians enjoyed overindulging in wine, Herodotus' account testifies that wine was not consumed in excess to become ill. Instead, wine was consumed for both enjoyment and the clarity it provided.

During the Achaemenid period, wine drinking became a pleasure and a privilege for all—not simply elites or the male population. Feasting and drinking were ubiquitous practices across the empire.⁴³ The Persian predilection for wine is apparent in the architectural sculpture and objects left behind at Darius' palace at Persepolis. Within the ruins of this grandiose palace

⁴¹ Ibid 1:7-8.

⁴² Herodotus, B. W. J. G. Wilson, and David J. D. Miller, *Stories from Herodotus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 28.

⁴³ Elspeth R. M. Dusing, *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia*, 123. This is the exact issue facing Muhammad at the time Islam was established.

stands the stairway leading into the Apadana Hall, a massive, columned reception hall of the kings. The palace decoration illustrates a procession of captives and dignitaries paying tribute to King Darius I, the patron of Persepolis (Figure 13). The figures identified by their garments, hairstyles, or headpieces (Figure 14; 15; 16) carry, among other objects as gifts for the king, vessels of wine. Though the figures are dressed in their native garb, the vessels are the same shape and style no matter who bears the offering—the Achaemenid deep bowl with a carinated



Figure 14 Babylonian Delegation, Apadana Tribute Procession, Eastern Stairway, 490 B.C.E., Persepolis, Iran.



Figure 13 Darius I and Xerxes Giving an Audience, Apadana Hall north Staircase, 490 B.C.E., Archeological Museum, Tehran.

rim.⁴⁴ Drinking vessels were not simply a vehicle for wine, but served their own purpose as a symbol of status. Persian court customs became legendary in antiquity and influential for thousands of years following the empire's defeat.⁴⁵



Figure 15 Parthian Delegation, Apadana Apadana Tribute Procession, Eastern Stairway, 490 B.C.E., Persepolis, Iran.



Figure 16 Syrian Delegation, Apadana Tribute Procession, Eastern Stairway, 490 B.C.E., Persepolis, Iran.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 130.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 115.

The Hellenistic Kingdoms in the Near East and Egypt

Following the conquest of the Near East and Egypt by Alexander the Great and the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire, the whole known world came under Macedonian rule. Alexander, the successor to the throne of the Macedonian state in Northern Greece, envisioned the merging of the two cultures, the western and the eastern and the creation of one universal culture. On one hand, he introduced the Greek language and cultural institutions in the east, and on the other hand, he adopted eastern customs and ideas, in particular the notion of the divinity of the king and the customs of a luxurious lifestyle.

By the late fourth century B.C.E., the importance of banqueting had long been established in the Greek culture: the symposium was one of the most important social institutions, and its importance well attested to in the remnants of public and private buildings, Greek vase painting and in literary sources.⁴⁶ The imported-from-the-east Dionysus, the god credited with introducing wine to humanity, induces madness, joy, and frivolity in those who imbibe his powerful and rebellious drink. The god of wine had already been equated in importance to the Olympian gods and his cult was already well established, as testified in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. However, with the conquest of Achaemenid Persia and the contact with the luxury of the Near East, the custom of banqueting was adopted on an unprecedented —by Greek standards at least—scale and continued the long-established traditions of the east.

With the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., the territory was inherited by his generals, who subdivided the vast empire into kingdoms. The Near East and Mesopotamia was ruled by the Seleucids and Egypt by the Ptolemies. These kings continued Alexander's vision

⁴⁶ For example, Plato's Dialogues record philosophical discussions during symposia between his teacher Socrates and other discussants.

and created unique and diverse hybrid cultures in the regions they ruled. The best known and longest lasting kingdom was that of the Ptolemies, which provides a good picture of the custom of banqueting in the Hellenistic royal court.

The Ptolemies adopted Dionysus as their patron god along with the cult of ruler, a custom with a history spanning millennia in the Near East and Egypt. Ptolemy II inaugurated an elaborate festival that rivaled the Olympics of Greece in honor of his father, Ptolemy I. The Ptolemaia festival that took place every four years in Alexandria.⁴⁷ According to Athenaeus, a Greco-Egyptian author, the festivities opened with a Dionysian procession with satyrs carrying gilded ivy torches, victories with golden wings carrying incense burners decorated in ivy, and a statue of Dionysus pouring a libation from a golden goblet.⁴⁸ Ptolemy II and his court observed the festival from an elaborate pavilion. Surrounded by a colonnade draped with a red canopy, the large pavilion held 130 ivory and gold couches. Four corner columns resembled palm trees while the rest of the columns resembled a thyrsus, a Dionysian ritual staff. 100 marble statues were placed on supporting piers and the walls of the colonnade were adorned with exotic animal pelts and tunics embroidered with mythical scenes and Ptolemaic portraits (Figure 17).⁴⁹ This elaborate pavilion, decorated in gold, ivory, and silks was used as a temporary banquet hall for Ptolemy II and his court. The Pavilion imitated a Persian prototype—a tent adorned with gold and silver, draped in multicolored tapestries, and of an exceptional size and complex plan. The king used the pavilion to surround himself in luxury even in the midst of battle.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Günther Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 94.

⁴⁸ Jerome Jordan Pollitt, *The Art of Rome, c. 753 B.C.-A.D. 337: Sources and Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 35.

⁵⁰ Margaret C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century B.C: A study in cultural receptivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 49-51.

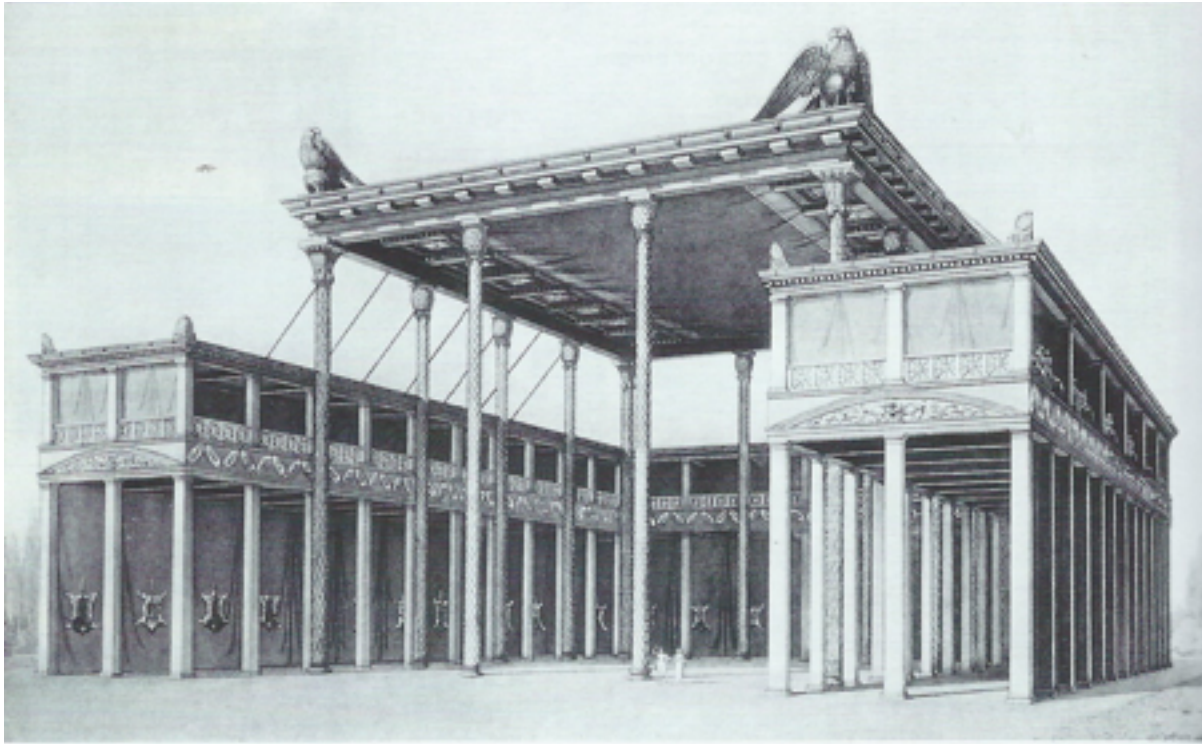


Figure 17 Reconstruction of Ptolemy II Philadelphos's Festival Pavilion of 279 B.C.E., by Franz Studnickza.

In addition to the Dionysian festival of Ptolemy I, court culture flourished under the Ptolemies of Egypt. The Nile Mosaic (Figure 18), found in the city of Palestrina, Italy, dates to the second century B.C.E. and depicts an idealized vision of life along the Nile in Hellenistic Egypt. While the upper half of the mosaic depicts the flora and fauna and geographical features of the Nile setting, the bottom of the mosaic is more significant in terms of the court banqueting culture along the Nile. Men and women recline on couches beneath a canopy heavy with grape vines in the midst of pleasure gardens of the Canopus (Figure 19). Musicians entertain the group while they drink from golden rhyta. In front of them, an old Egyptian

fisherman struggles to row his canoe through the reeds as the raucous partygoers ignore him.⁵¹

This depiction of the indulgences of the elite even among the poor and weary mimics the supposed opulence of the Ptolemies.



Figure 18 The Nile Mosaic, from Praeneste (modern Palestrina), near Rome, c. 125-100 B.C.E., Palestrina.

⁵¹ Andrew Stewart, *Art in the Hellenistic World: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 217-218.



Figure 19 Close up of the pleasure gardens of the Canopus, east of Alexandria, The Nile Mosaic, from Praeneste (modern Palestrina), near Rome, c. 125-100 B.C.E., Palestrina.

The Roman Empire in the Near East

By 30 B.C.E. the whole territory of the Hellenistic kingdoms had become provinces of the Roman Empire, which continued the policy of assimilation of preexisting cultures. A great example of this cultural assimilation is offered by the Sanctuary of Jupiter and Bacchus in Baalbek, known as Heliopolis to the Romans, located in Lebanon's Beqa'a valley.⁵²

Originally a cultic site for the Semitic god Baal, Baalbek was presumably settled by the Assyrians—its location as a fertile watershed making it desirable. After the death of Alexander the Great, the city fell under Seleucid rule, becoming a major Hellenistic center, until being annexed by the Roman Empire following their defeat of the Seleucids in 63 B.C.E. A temple complex was built by the Romans atop the surviving ruins of the Semitic and Seleucid sites; within the complex were constructed sanctuaries dedicated to Jupiter, Bacchus, and Venus (Figure 20).

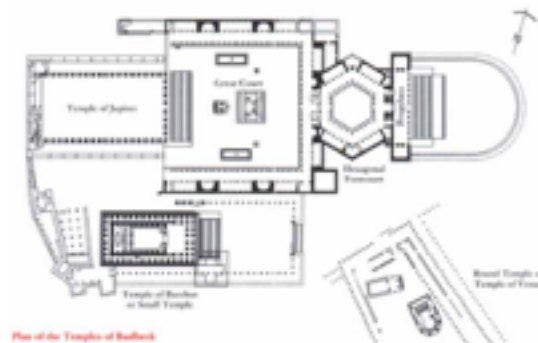


Figure 20 Heliopolis (Baalbek), plan of the temple complex including the Temple of Jupiter, The Temple of Bacchus, and the Temple of Venus.

⁵² Arthur Segal, *Temples and Sanctuaries in the Roman East*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013) 120.

The Temple of Bacchus (Figure 21), commissioned by Emperor Antoninus Pius in the second century C.E., sits on an east-west axis (the entrance facing east) and utilizes the traditional vocabulary of Greek and Roman architecture, yet is decorated in a highly ornate style preserves its extensive carved ornamentation. The temple was presumably dedicated to the Roman interpretation of the god of wine—the god of banqueting and amusement. Bacchus was a god who served, not a god who required service; if his service or worship was required it was in the form of indulgence and passion.⁵³



Figure 21 Temple of Bacchus, late 2nd or early 3rd century C.E., Baalbek, Lebanon.

Figural representations within the temple, the faces in the vaults and the cult statue of Bacchus, are unrecognizable or cease to exist. However, the surviving ornament, carved in the temple's door jambs, the entablature and the vaults in the pteron of the temple are full of vegetal motifs and in particular, vine rinceaux. Vine rinceaux is a stylized vegetal motif of vines springing from drinking vessels. The vines fill the space in various degrees of complexity and offer insight into the deity for which the temple was built. The jambs of the

⁵³ Valerie J. Hutchinson, "the Cult of Bacchus in Roman Britain," *Pagan Gods and Shrines of the Roman Empire*, 135.

doorway are into vine rinceaux (Figure 22) and the entablature along with the dentils has geometric vegetal designs. The vaults under the colonnade are nearly dissolved by ornament. Human faces are carved within a hollowed hexagon or diamond shape, the border of each shape again carved with grape vines and leaves and from these faces, triangle with similar vine-like motifs emanate outwards creating a star shape (Figure 23). Vine motifs were a common theme among Roman art and architecture, in reference to a popular and beloved god and were extensively copied in late antique art.



Figure 22 Temple of Bacchus, door jamb, late 2nd or early 3rd century C.E., Baalbek, Lebanon.



Figure 23 Temple of Bacchus, vault decoration late 2nd or early 3rd century C.E., Baalbek, Lebanon.

Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire in the Near East

With Emperor Constantine in 330 C.E. and the transfer of the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, the Near East and Egypt continued to be part of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Greek language as the official language and Christianity was the official religion.

Much like their Persian, Greek, and Roman predecessors, the Byzantine emperors also enjoyed dinner parties for the sake of demonstrating their wealth and power to various ambassadors and officials. Seating was carefully arranged at imperial banquets, heavy golden vessels laden with rich, sumptuous foods were lifted onto the tables via gilded leather ropes and a complex system of stage machinery, the dining room ceiling was decorated with coffered coffers each carved with images of trees and vine scrolls, and the guests were entertained by musicians and acrobats; all of this extravagance was of course in an effort to impress.⁵⁴ While the dining rooms are no longer extant and little is left of the palaces of Constantinople, a large peristyle courtyard, entirely decorated with mosaics remains partially intact (Figure 24).



Figure 24 Floor Mosaics, Great Palace of Constantinople, 5th century, The Great Palace Mosaic Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

⁵⁴ Eunice Dauterman Maguire and Henry Maguire, *Other Icons: Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) 29-30.

Dating from the fifth century C.E., the exact function of the courtyard is unknown, however the themes represented in the floor mosaic indicate that this area of the palace was reserved for the emperor and possibly his court. The mosaics depict scenes of hunting, particularly large, ferocious animals like tigers (Figure 25), scenes of harvesting—perhaps a nod to the wealth and fertility of the empire (Figure 26), and scenes of nature. The border of the mosaic is decorated with an acanthus scroll draped in pomegranates again a reference to the fecundity of the empire or perhaps a mention of paradise. The Christian notion of paradise, or rather heaven, transformed from a luxurious garden to an imperial city based on the pleasure gardens and elegant buildings of Rome.⁵⁵ The city is adorned with precious gemstones, a river flows from the throne of God and on both sides of the river the tree of life bears 12 kinds of fruit.⁵⁶ In this kingdom of heaven, man lives amongst God and his angels and pleasure is derived from service to God. Thus early descriptions and depictions of heaven recall both the luxuries of Imperial Rome and the peace and beauty of Eden.



Figure 25 Floor Mosaics, Great Palace of Constantinople, 5th century, The Great Palace Mosaic Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

⁵⁵ Richard P. Taylor, *Death and the Afterlife: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2000) 164.

⁵⁶ Revelation 21 and 22 HCSB.



Figure 26 Floor Mosaics, Great Palace of Constantinople, 5th century, The Great Palace Mosaic Museum, Istanbul, Turkey.

Though wine imagery was typically used in reference to a ruler's divine power, or to delineate leisure and privilege, wine served a different function in the lives of Christian Byzantine rulers and their subjects. As a symbol for Christ, wine was now imbibed not with the intention of drunkenness or debauchery, but as the transubstantiated blood of Christ, "Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He gave it to them and said, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood that establishes a new covenant; it is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"⁵⁷

Those who ingest Christ's blood do so as a profession of their own faith in its power. Each occasion during which communion is offered, the 'blood of Christ' ensures a new life free

⁵⁷ Matthew 26:27-28, Holman Christian Standard Bible.

from past sins.⁵⁸ Banqueting scenes, an iconography typically associated with the wealth and power of rulers, was now associated with a young religion which denounced the consumption of wine to the point of drunkenness. Thus, rather than depictions of powerful rulers bearing a cup amidst a paradisiacal garden, wine imagery was transformed during the Byzantine Empire into a more abstracted concept.

Depictions of the grape harvest covered the floors of churches and monasteries in the Holy Land by the middle of the 6th century C.E. One such mosaic, found at Kyria Maria Monastery at Beth Shean, demonstrates a connection between the earthly and the spiritual realms in terms of the grape harvest (Figure 27). Vine scrolls emanate from a central vase at the bottom of the mosaic creating 12 medallions. Each medallion presumably holds a male figure who is sometimes accompanied by an animal, harvesting or hauling grapes, or playing an instrument. Though abstract, the scene presents viewers with the concept of salvation and ultimately a paradisiacal afterlife. The abundance offered by the harvest signifies both the abundant blessings of salvation, and the way in which one reaches that salvation—imbibing the “blood of christ.” Wine iconography now serves a new spiritual function, one which cannot be utilized by the emperor in a secular manner.

⁵⁸ The statement that Christ’s blood cleanses believers from their sins is often repeated in the Bible. “But if we walk in the light, as He himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1 John 1:7 HCSB.
“To Him who loves us and has set us free from our sins by His blood.” Revelation 1:5.



Figure 27 Floor Mosaic, Kyria Maria Monastery, 6th century, Beth Shean, Israel.

The Sassanian Empire

The Sassanian empire emerged in the third century C.E. following the defeat of the Parthians of ancient Iran by the Roman Empire. The empire progressively expanded until it controlled a vast empire comprised of Mesopotamia, the Indus River, Syria, the Holy Land, and Egypt.⁵⁹ As an important mediator of luxury goods including silks, and spices between China and the west, the Sassanians were in a critical position to directly influence the commodities and artistry of the Roman, Byzantine, and future Islamic empires.⁶⁰ The Sassanians, viewing

⁵⁹ Anna Gonosová, "Exotic Taste: The Lure of Sasanian Persia," *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World*, ed. Eva R. Hoffman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 40-41.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

themselves as successors to the Achaemenid Persian Empire, ruled over a centralized state, with all the power in the hands of the divinely appointed kings and royal family.⁶¹

The majority of remaining Sassanian art conveys themes of royal glory. These themes include the victories of Sassanian kings, whether over animals or enemies, and alluding to their ancestors, banqueting and pleasure gardens. Because of their association with and claim to the ideology of the Achaemenids, the Sassanians continued a tradition of depicting their kings in paradise. A great example of Sassanian art utilizing Persian iconography is a plate depicting a Sassanian king in a banqueting scene (Figure 28). The Sassanian king, identified by his crown



Figure 28 Sassanian King, silver, 5th century C.E., Cincinnati Art Museum.

and two lions below, reclines on a lush couch, while holding a cup of wine in his hand. Around the border of the plate, are musicians and attendants. The scene alludes to the depictions of banqueting in Assyrian and Persian art. The Sassanian king is illustrated partaking in the

⁶¹ Ibid.

preferred pleasures of his ancestors. Another artifact that demonstrates the Sassanian love of wine is a gilded silver wine strainer, adorned with grapevines, fowl, and naked young boys gathering grapes intended for winemaking (Figure 29).



Figure 29 Vineyard Scenes on a Wine Strainer, Gilded Silver Vase, Late Sassanian, 6th century C.E., British Museum.

Finally, an image borrowed from the Greeks, the triumph of Dionysus, is embossed on a silver dish (Figure 30). The god is depicted reclining against a heavy grapevine hanging overhead while he is surrounded by revelers. He is holding a cup of wine in his right hand.

As heirs to the Achaemenid Empire, the Sassanians continued a tradition of producing lavishly decorated, high quality silver drinking vessels as a means to exhibit wealth and status. The inclusion of both an earthy paradise and the merrymaking associated with Dionysus demonstrates sophistication and recognition of the visual history of their predecessors.



Figure 30 Triumph of Dionysus, Silver cup, Sasanian Period, 3rd Century C.E., British Museum, London.

Conclusions

Initially conceived as a dietary staple, intoxicating beverages, specifically beer, were available to all. However, the rarity and luxury of wine was enjoyed solely by the ruling class. The mind-altering and euphoric effects of drinking wine to excess provide a mystical or transcendent experience for the drinker. Thus, wine quickly became associated with and reserved for the divine as both a ritualistic and commemorative substance. Partaking in wine drinking and banqueting, aligned rulers with the gods, raising them to the level of a deity. This concept of banqueting became a tradition of luxury appearing in the writings and visual history of the ruling empires of the Near East, from Sumer to the Sassanian Empire. The earliest understanding of wine is as a substance reserved for the divine and the ruling classes. The walled garden, “paradise”, was conceived as the ultimate location of pleasure and privilege, and as such it first appeared in Assyria and Persia.

In the Greco-Roman culture, the pleasure garden and vine imagery became a staple of the symposium and necessary iconographical features of the wine god Dionysus-Bacchus. Later in

Late Antiquity, wine was associated with Jesus Christ and the notion of paradise was transferred to the afterlife. The introduction and development of these ideas about paradise and a transcendent libation created a cultural and visual heritage of millennia in the Near East, which would eventually impact the religious and secular realms of Islam.

CHAPTER 2: EARLY ISLAMIC ART: THE LITERARY SOURCES

Islam was born into a region in which the production, sale, and consumption of wine had a long history. Not only is pre-Islamic art abundant with the subject of drinking and wine and the notion of banqueting as an elite activity, but pre-Islamic Arabian societies frequently consumed and praised wine; its status as a luxury was celebrated in literature dedicated to the substance and its consumption was tied to virtue and generosity. A pre-Islamic Arabic poem boasts, “when the cup gains ascendancy over me my virtues appear and my companions need fear no harm from me and need not worry about my avarice.”⁶² The only circumstances under which drinkers abstained were those of mourning or blood revenge; two circumstances in which a loss of control or a weakening of inhibitions would be found inappropriate.⁶³

Islamic ideas on wine and drinking are revealed through the two holy texts of Islam, the Qur’an and the Hadith, and show a differentiation between attitudes towards wine in the heavenly and earthly realm, respectively. Early Islamic poetry celebrates wine and illustrated that the prohibition of wine was not an easy sacrifice.

The Qur’an on the promise of wine and drinking in the afterlife

The Qur’an is a record of Allah’s revelations to Muhammad, it includes the Five Pillars of Islam and gives an extensive account of life after death promised to the believers by Allah. Paradise is the utmost reward of Allah, a place in which “no soul knows what comforts lie hidden for them, a joy to the eyes as a reward for their righteousness.”⁶⁴ According to the Qur’an, Paradise is free from vanity, strife, struggle, and pain, and believers are rewarded:

⁶² Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 29.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Qur’an 32:17.

...with a garden and a raiment of silk, reclining therein upon couches, they will find there neither excessive heat nor excessive cold. And its shades will be close over them and its clustered fruits will be brought within easy reach. And vessels of silver will be passed round among them, and also goblets of glass... And there will wait upon them youths who will not age...On them will be garments of fine green silk and thick brocade. And they will be made to wear bracelets of silver and their Lord will give them to drink a pure beverage.⁶⁵

The Qur'an describes a realm in which believers live in peace and pure bliss. Gardens dotted with mansions, flowing streams, ripe fruits, and believers adorned in robes of silk and bracelets of silver is the antithesis of the circumstances and conditions in which early believers lived. The image of Paradise the Qur'an provides is not only an image of the supreme triumph and reward offered by Allah, but pleasures that were not afforded to the lower classes living in a desert region. In another excerpt, the Qur'an describes paradise as following:

a description of the Garden promised to those who guard against evil. Therein are streams of water which corrupts not, and rivers of milk which the taste changes not, and rivers of wine extracted from grapes, a delight to the drinkers, and rivers of clarified honey, and they will have in it all kinds of fruit and forgiveness from their Lord.⁶⁶

The Qur'an's vivid description of the afterlife mirror that of pre-Islamic elite indulgences enjoyed in Mesopotamian society as well as by the Greeks and the Romans: a pleasant garden with abundant water supply and vegetation where drinking can occur. In fact, god himself rewards the participants with wine along with other delicacies. Those who obey Allah's guidelines will most certainly achieve the ultimate goal, a paradise defined by goblets of the prohibited inebriant, fine garments, attendants, and a perfect climate. So, the well-established subject of banqueting in a pleasure garden was now adopted by Muhammed as the ultimate gift

⁶⁵ Ibid, 76:14-22.

⁶⁶ Qur'an 47: 15.

to those who lived their lives according to the Five Pillars of Islam—a gift promised not only to the elite but all believers regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The Hadith on the Prohibition of Wine in Earthly Life

The Hadith is a collection of the teachings, sayings, reactions, and punishments of Muhammed, recorded and disseminated by his disciples. The Hadith serves as an account of how Muhammad lived in his daily life and the ways in which Muslims must follow his lead.⁶⁷ This collection holds accounts of Muhammad's reactions to everything from sports, games, and gambling, to intoxication and the punishment for these indiscretions. Though second in authority to the Qur'an, the Hadith informs believers of the minute daily habits which they must adhere to in the obedience of Allah. It is held in high regard and is considered Holy Law.

Regarding drinking and wine, the Hadith established a clear distinction between the heavenly and earthly realms. Contrary to the heavenly realm, in the earthly realm, wine and drinking are strictly prohibited and a series of punishments is outlined for the different degrees of violation of this ban.

Soon after the establishment of Islam, Muhammed realized that the custom of drinking along with gambling did not allow the Muslims to fulfill their obligations according to the five pillars of Islam described in the Qur'an and achieve the ultimate goal of the afterlife in paradise. The people of Mecca and Medina indulged in drinking, participating in drinking parties which ultimately led to gambling, brawling, and on one occasion the mutilation of camels.⁶⁸ In an effort to maintain order and advance the spread of Islam, Muhammad was quick to ban intoxicants.

⁶⁷ Walter H. Wagner, *Opening the Qur'an*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Books, 2008), 17.

⁶⁸ H.A.R. Gibb, ed. "Khamr," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, (Leiden: Brill, 1954), 894.

The etymology of the Arabic word for wine reveals the Islamic ideas towards the consumption of wine in the earthly realm: *khamr*, meaning cover or veil. The word *khamr* reveals wine's effect of veiling or impeding man's intellect. This temporary covering of intellect results in a lack of the ability to discern right from wrong, an inability to control the body and its functions, languidness, and an inability to manage funds and refrain from spending wages on wine; the Qur'an further likens squandering to ungrateful satans.⁶⁹ The spiritual and temporal reasons behind the prohibition of wine overlap, yet the spiritual aspect covers more than a lack of control over the body. The drunkard is in danger of marring his soul as, "there is no sin which a drunkard cannot commit when he loses his intellect because he loses his power of control and self-restraint."⁷⁰ Under the influence of wine, man is in danger of further committing a multitude of sins defined by the Qur'an.⁷¹ Since the ultimate goal is eternal life in Paradise with Allah, wine as well as gambling and divination are sins that separate believers from God. Furthermore, the Qur'an states the use of such sins created by Satan as a means to "participate enmity and hatred between you by means of intoxicants and games of chance and to stop you from remembrance of Allah and from observing your prayer."⁷² As one of the Five Pillars of Islam, prayer is a crucial component of the religion practiced five times per day by believers. Because of the significance of prayer, Muhammad's early prohibition of wine was simply to ensure devotees participated in prayer only when sober for the Qur'an states: "O you who believe! do

⁶⁹ Al-Haj Maulana Fazlul Karim, trans., *Hadith* (Dakka, 1969), vol. 2, 566.

"Certainly, the squanderers are like satans and satan is always ungrateful to his Lord." Q 17:27.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Qur'an 5:90.

"O you who believe! Intoxicants and games of chance, and alters set up for false deities and divining arrows are only abominations, some of Satan's handiwork, therefore shun each one [of these abominations] so that you may attain your ultimate goal."

⁷² Qur'an 5:91.

not go near Prayer when you are not in full possession of you senses, until you understand all that you say in your prayers.”⁷³

The Hadith further outlined punishment for intoxication.⁷⁴ The punishment for public intoxication varied according to the degree of public nuisance or any offense committed under the influence. Any Muslim found drinking was subject to 40 lashes, a number that increased to 80 lashes under the rule of Caliph Umar I, Muhammed’s immediate successor; repeat offenders or those caught committing adultery while intoxicated could be sentenced to death for their indiscretions and punishments were only carried out once the offender was sober.⁷⁵ The Hadith not only communicates the physical punishments imposed by the Prophet and his disciples, but Allah’s divine punishments including rejecting a drunkard’s prayers for 40 days, forcing drunkards to drink Tinatul Khabal, the sweat and discharge of the inmates of Hell, and—most importantly—refusal into paradise.⁷⁶

Umar’s severity was not simply in reference to Muslims, but enforced among non-believers. The Pact of Umar offers a list of obligations the Christians in the community promise to adhere to in return for safe conduct and peace between the two religions. As the primary tavern owners, Christians and Jews were now subject to severe punishments if even the sale or consumption of alcohol occurred on their premises. The accusation of intoxication was no longer to blame on the disobedient Muslim, but the dhimmi (non-Muslim) who provided the

⁷³ Ibid, 4:43.

⁷⁴ In addition to the consequences of intoxication, the Hadith provides a list of the types of alcohol or wine that are prohibited. This includes wine made of grapes, dates, wheat, barley, and honey. Though the Prophet allowed Nabidh, a drink typically made from dates, if left to ferment or prepared in a vessel typically used to prepare wine, this drink was also forbidden. The Hadith does not differentiate between wine and other alcoholic beverages, but forbids anything that intoxicates.

⁷⁵ Al-Haj Maulana Fazlul Karim, trans., *Al-Hadis* (Dakka, 1969), vol. 2 560-561.

⁷⁶ Al-Haj Maulana Fazlul Karim, trans., *Al-Hadis* (Dakka, 1969), vol. 2 568-572.

forbidden food or beverage. The compliance of Muslims towards the ban on wine must have fallen short of Muhammad and the succeeding caliphate's ideal, thus restrictions and punishments were applied not to the Muslims who continued to drink and praise wine in secret, but those who procured and sold wine to the Muslim community. These restrictions expose a need for the caliphate to expand their control to the dhimmi community in an effort to maintain control over the Muslim population.

Wine in Early Islamic Poetry

According to the favorable writings of Islamic scholars, the ban was blindly obeyed by followers and inhabitants of Medina whose response was to pour out all the wine they could find flooding the streets of the city.⁷⁷ However, additional insights are offered by early Islamic poetry that give us a glance into different attitudes towards wine and its prohibition in Islam.

Muhammad's court poet, Hassan Thabit, composed poetry in an effort to further discourage believers from wine drinking. These stories talk about wealthy pagans whose introduction to Islam supposedly changed their attitudes towards indulging in wine for "God has revealed Islam to us and had thus abolished all disbelief and we have given up wine drinking and all that is despicable."⁷⁸ Though these stories were invented by the Prophet and his court poet, they reveal a necessity to provide pagans or non-Muslims with one of their own's story of conversion. In this poem, a wealthy non-Muslim's introduction to Islam has altered his beliefs and behavior in favor of Muhammad and his teachings. His story becomes an example or model

⁷⁷ Hugh Johnson, *Vintage: The Story of Wine* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 52.

⁷⁸ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), 32.

to follow and emulate. Muhammad's stories of converted dhimmi promoted repentance and abstention.

A different attitude to wine and drinking is offered by an extensive collection of Arabian poetry dedicated solely to wine drinking that reveals an early and continued hostility and rebellion towards the ban of wine and drinking. An example of such a poem that praises wine and wine drinking was composed following Muhammad's death, under a more pious and spiritually sound caliph, Umar I, whose insistence on obedience was accompanied by even more severe punishments for those who failed to comply. The poet, while aware of Muhammad's teachings, refuses to relinquish his beloved amusement and instead accepts the consequences of his blasphemy.

Give me, o friend, some wine to drink; though I am
 well aware of what God has revealed about wine.
Give me pure wine to make my sin bigger because only
 when it is drunk unmixed is the sin complete.
Though wine has become rare and though we have been
 deprived of it through Islam and the threat of

 punishment have divorced us from it:
Nevertheless I do drink it in the early morning hours
 in deep draughts, I drink it unmixed and from time to
 time I become gay and drink it mixed with water.
At my head stands a singing girl and while
 she sings she flirts;
Sometimes she sings loudly, sometimes
 softly, humming like flies in the garden.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Ibid pg 33.

Conclusions

Wine and drinking in the Qur'an retained the status of the ultimate pleasure and luxury shared in pre-Islamic societies and cultures. The promise of god is banqueting with wine in paradise, a garden that now can be enjoyed by everybody in the afterlife.

It was not until Muhammad labeled wine drinking an abomination of Satan that attitudes towards drinking were differentiated in regards to the heavenly and the earthly realms.

Considered a luxury and the ultimate reward from Allah in the afterlife, wine consumption on earth presumably led to hedonistic behaviors which prevented believers from fulfilling the obligations set by the Five Pillars of Islam. Unable to fulfill these obligations, wine ultimately separates believers from Allah and achieving his reward—eternal life in Paradise.

Islamic poetry offered insights about the resistance of the ban of wine and drinking even in Islamic societies and possibly alludes to the fact that the most powerful and secluded Muslims enjoyed banqueting and wine even in the earthly realm.

CHAPTER 3: PARADISIACAL IMAGERY AND WINE IN RELIGIOUS ART OF THE Umayyad Caliphate

Islamic religious art, being aniconic, set as its goal to illustrate the verses of the Qur'an, and give a visual image to the believers of the "paradise", the fertile garden, full of vegetation and water, promised by god, where the believers would enjoy the pleasures of banqueting and drinking in afterlife. For that goal, the Umayyad Caliphate adopted the long established iconography of paradise, that includes vine-like tendrils (rinceaux motifs), amphoras, tazzas, palace pavilions, and rich vegetation, all found in the visual heritage of the preceding civilizations discussed in chapter one. This chapter reviews the paradisiacal imagery in early Islamic religious art found across different media in Jerusalem and Damascus.

The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

The significance of the Dome of the Rock exists not in the building itself, but its foundation and core (Figure 31). The building encircles a large rock recognized as a holy site and a location where man has often encountered God.⁸⁰ Believed to be the location where Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, the place where Solomon built his temple, and where Muhammad entered heaven during his Isra and Miraj journey.⁸¹ As a holy site in Islam, the Dome of the Rock marks not only the location of divine interactions between God and Islam's holy prophets,⁸² but an entrance to Paradise, the ultimate reward for believers.

⁸⁰ Oleg Grabar, *The Dome of the Rock* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) 36; 52-53.

⁸¹ Qur'an 17:1. The Isra and Miraj refers to the Night Journey that according to Islamic tradition Muhammad took in 621 C.E. with the angel Gabriel. Muhammad was carried by Gabriel from the Holy Mosque at Mecca to the farthest mosque, the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, where he entered heaven and was given a revelation from Allah regarding prayer.

⁸² Muhammad ascended to heaven encountering prophets and ultimately God, receiving instruction for prayer from Allah.



Figure 31 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, Completed 691 C.E.

The Dome of the Rock was commissioned and built by Abd al-Malik in the 7th century C.E. and, as the earliest example of Umayyad imperial architecture, is not a mosque or place of prayer, but instead a shrine and pilgrimage site located in the precinct of a mosque. The original intention of the building is unknown, yet several accounts offer an explanation to both the construction of the building and its extravagant exterior and interior decoration. According to art historian Oleg Grabar, the Dome of the Rock was built as both a monument to the Muslim faith and in competition to the existing Christian churches within the city.⁸³ Traditionally a holy site to Jews and Christians prior to Islam, Jerusalem was carpeted in beautiful Christian churches, including the impressive Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a Byzantine pilgrimage site built by Constantine the Great that supposedly marked the spot of Christ's crucifixion.⁸⁴ While in competition with local Christian churches, the Dome of the Rock also marks the location of the first Jewish Temple. Solomon's Temple, which is believed to have housed the Ark of the

⁸³ Oleg Grabar, *The Shape of Holy: Early Islamic Jerusalem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 53-54.

⁸⁴ This is also the location where Constantine's mother Helena found pieces of the True Cross, the cross on which Christ was crucified.

Covenant, and thus considered the holiest place for the Jews too.⁸⁵ Though the temple was destroyed centuries prior to Islam, Abd al-Malik's intention to build a monument to Islam atop a Jewish holy site and near a sacred Christian site demonstrates the Caliph's political authority as well as the authority of Islam over its predecessors.

Abd al-Malik erected an octagonal building around the Rock of Jerusalem creating an alternative pilgrimage site to the Ka'ba in Mecca.⁸⁶ The Dome of the Rock is a centrally planned building with a dome covering the rock in the center. Around the rock are two concentric ambulatories supported on arcades; the first is circular with the columns supporting arcades (Figure 32) and the second octagonal with the columns supporting horizontal beams with arcades on top (Figure 33). The exterior of the building is a later renovation, but the interior decoration survives from the time the building was built and is one the most important examples of early Islamic religious art, central to this thesis.



Figure 32 Dome of the Rock, Interior, circular inner arcade, Jerusalem, Completed 691 C.E.

⁸⁵ 1 Kings 6; The Ark of the Covenant held the Ten Commandments, the Staff of Aaron, and a jar of Manna, all three indications of the promises and power of God. According to Exodus 25, it served as meeting place where Moses would encounter God and hear His commandments for the Israelites.

⁸⁶ Translation of Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī's description of the Dome of the Rock in Amikam Elad, "Why did Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock, A Re-Examination of Muslim Sources," *Bayt al-Maqdis: Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem Part One*, trans. Julien Raby and Jeremy Johns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34-35.



Figure 33 Dome of the Rock, Interior, Octagonal arcade, tie-beam, Jerusalem, completed 691 C.E.

The interior decoration is excessively rich, owing to the various techniques and materials used. The walls of the building are covered floor to ceiling with polychromatic marble panels forming geometric patterns. The columns of the two ambulatories are supported on marble pedestals and support gilded corinthian capitals. The wooden tie-beams of the outer ambulatory are intricately carved, and the arcades on top of them (including the spandrels of the arcade) are fully covered with mosaics.

These wooden tie-beams, covered in copper alloy to appear more luxurious, display a common motif that has its origins in Roman and Late Antique art, and which was utilized in Umayyad iconography: the vine rinceaux motif. Emerging from a tree or a vase, long bands of stylized vines with leaves and fruit or flowers, curl in and out sprouting leaves and clusters of grapes (Figure 34).



Figure 34 Dome of the Rock, Tie-beam, Jerusalem, Completed 691 C.E.

A variation of this tie-beam is another example of a tie-beam that exhibits an unusual insight into the appearance of grape clusters. This portion of the repetitive pattern emanates not from a tree or a case, but rather a tazza, or drinking vessel typically used for wine (Figure 35). Directly above the tazza are two unattached clusters of grapes which appear to be falling into the cup rather than springing from it potentially indicating the creation of wine.

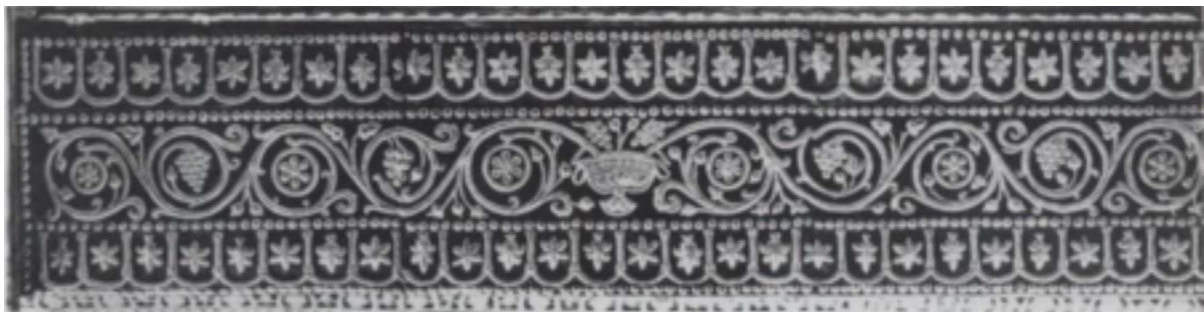


Figure 35 Dome of the Rock, Tie-beam featuring Tazza, Jerusalem, completed 691 C.E.

The vine rinceaux motif is not limited to this section of the Dome of the Rock, but continues throughout the interior decoration on a larger, more elaborate scale, including in the most spectacular decoration of the building, the mosaics covering the spandrels and soffits of each ambulatory and the drum of the dome. These mosaics conform to the aniconism of Islam,

in terms of figural forms, and depict realistically rendered trees heavy laden with fruits, vine rinceaux, and acanthus bowls and scrolls referencing classical art forms.⁸⁷

On the spandrels of the octagonal arcade are mosaics that consist of various types of vegetation interwoven and dripping with gemstones, jewelry, and crowns (Figure 36). Set on a golden background, similar to that in Byzantine mosaics representing the heavenly realm, tendrils of foliage emanate from a multilayered and elaborately bejeweled vase. Following the slender base of the vessel, to the left and right hang what appears to be two pearl earrings, above the earrings a crown. This design repeats towards the top of the vase adding jewels and medallions to each level. From the top tendrils spiral out of the vessel, from these hang bunches of grapes and other fruits. To the right and left of the vase are two long vines alternating red gemstones and pearls sprouting leaves and ultimately more grape clusters. Burgeoning between the vegetation sits the most elaborate crown decorated with gems and precious stones.



Figure 36 Dome of the Rock, pendentive mosaic, Jerusalem, completed 691 C.E.

⁸⁷ Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications Inc, 1977), 20.

The most intricate mosaic patterns are found in the lowest drum of the dome rising above the inner arcade (Figure 37). This mosaic depicts the same theme as the spandrel mosaics, but here the bowl is replaced with a slightly altered and compelling form and an expansive combination of vegetation. From the amphora, vine rinceaux spring symmetrically curling into columns of three spirals one atop the other, what appear to be pearls in the place of grapes growing on the vines. The amphora is decorated in horizontal bands of baubles and gemstones mimicking collar necklaces, earrings, and other forms of jewelry. From the center of the amphora rise five circles of different sizes stacked one on top of the other, and on top of them, is a pair of wings framing a crown.



Figure 37 Dome of the Rock, dome mosaic, Jerusalem, completed 691C.E.

These spirals mimic the medallions on the floor mosaic in Beth Shean (Figure 27), however the figures are replaced with negative space and the reference to paradise is made with pearls and gemstones. The tiara and the jewels found in both mosaics can be found in Byzantine mosaics that depict the emperor and the empress. The imperial mosaics in San Vitale in Ravenna that depict the emperor Justinian and his attendants (Figure 38) and the empress and her attendants (Figure 39), both commissioned in the sixth century, are good examples of Byzantine imperial iconography of the imperial family. The figures are richly decorated in gemstones, crowns, collar necklaces, and earrings. The wings depicted in the dome mosaic framing a crown can be identified as the Sassanid crown of Khosrow II (Figure 40).⁸⁸



Figure 38 Emperor Justinian and his attendants, San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna, Italy, completed 548 C.E.

⁸⁸ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 55-58.



Figure 39 Empress Theodora, San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna, Italy, completed 548 C.E.



Figure 40 Sassanian Coin featuring Khosrow II, 590-628.

These iconographic references clearly served as an indication of imperial authority and conveyed the political message that Islam was the successor of the authority and faith in both these empires.⁸⁹ But more importantly, the jewels represent gifts promised to believers in paradise. “They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and with pearls; and their raiment therein will be of silk.”⁹⁰ While ornament is not forbidden by Allah, these objects are symbols of wealth and royalty not available to laymen. The crowns, clusters of pearls, and various forms of jewelry hanging from the vine rinceaux in these mosaics are symbols to believers of what awaits. Paradise offers the righteous incredible and lavish treasures and pleasures unattainable on earth.

Finally, the significance of this mosaic motif lies in the amphora, a two handle vessel for holding and transporting wine. The mosaics pull their design from various verses found in the Qur’an while adhering to an aniconistic program.

In conclusion, the Dome of the Rock stands as a shrine to both the location of Allah’s ascension into heaven and the entrance to Paradise, the rock encased by a structure adorned with mosaics depicting the glories followers expect from the afterlife.

Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is also located in the al-Haram al-Sharif, the holy site in Jerusalem, where the Dome of the Rock is located. It is the largest building in the complex and the site where the archangel Gabriel is thought to have carried Muhammad during the Night Journey.⁹¹ It was built by Umar I, expanded by Abd al-Malik and completed by his son Walid I, who

⁸⁹ Oleg Grabar, *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹⁰ Qur’an 22: 24.

⁹¹ Qur’an 17:1.

continued the traditional Umayyad motif of vine rinceaux decoration. Similar to the wooden tie-beams found in the Dome of the Rock, this wooden soffit from the al-Aqsa Mosque depicts vertically oriented vines encircling enlarged leaves and clusters of grapes (Figure 41).⁹² The vine rinceaux motif here is more simple, does not include jewels and is probably a metaphor for paradisiacal rewards given to those who worship and pray within the mosque. This was a popular motif in the Umayyad period.



Figure 41 Wooden Soffit, Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem, 705 C.E.

⁹² Soffit = The underside of an entablature, an arch or architrave, a projecting cornice. The exposed undersurface of any exterior overhang.

Great Mosque of Damascus

“Inhabitants of Damascus, four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits, and your baths. To there I wanted to add a fifth: this mosque.”

-Al-Walid ibn Abd al-Malik, Caliph 705-715 C.E.

Completed in 715 C.E., the construction of the Great Mosque of Damascus established permanent authority of the Umayyad caliphate in a city previously under Roman, Persian, Arab, and Byzantine rule. The structure borrows architectural forms from its Roman and Byzantine predecessors. Built by al-Walid I, the reigning caliph following his father's abdication, the mosque sits on the destroyed remains of both the Byzantine Basilica of St. John the Baptist and an earlier Roman temple (Figure 42). The mosque adopted the plan of the Roman basilica, yet the entrance to the long nave and added hypostyle hall is on the long side of the building on the axis to the qibla wall rather than the apse.



Figure 42 The Great Mosque of Damascus, Damascus, completed 715 C.E.

The mosaics on the exterior of the Great Mosque provide further insight into the pleasures of Paradise. Above the entrance to the mosque is a mosaic cycle that features large and richly foliated trees and various buildings distributed similar to a cityscape, all on a golden background. The mosaics continue on the interior walls of the arcade which surrounds the entirety of the mosque's courtyard providing shade to guests (Figure 43). These mosaics depict grand, embellished pavilions standing above flowing rivers, surrounded by rich vegetation before a golden background (Figure 44), an effort to portray Paradise.⁹³ Upon entering a building set aside for prayer and worship, believers are confronted with the “delightful dwelling places in Gardens of Eternity” described in the Qur'an.⁹⁴ The Great Mosque undoubtedly offers insight into the luxuries rewarded in the afterlife as these images are exhibited on the exterior of buildings built for religious worship and prayer.



Figure 43 The Great Mosque of Damascus, Courtyard Arcade, Damascus, Completed 715 C.E.

⁹³ The same golden background is used in Byzantine mosaics to portray the heavenly realm. These mosaics were supposedly executed by Byzantine artists explaining the paralleled depiction of heaven/paradise.

⁹⁴ Qur'an 9: 72.



Figure 44 The Great Mosque of Damascus, Mosaic cycle, interior wall of the courtyard arcade, Damascus, completed 715.

Conclusions

Representations of the gardens and dwelling places of paradise are present on what is believed to be the entrance to Paradise: The Dome of the Rock, the Al' Aqsa Mosque, and the Great Mosque, a model for future mosques as well as a grand monument identifying the political and religious authority of the Umayyad rulers. These aspects are further explored in an attempt to illustrate the relationship between both the Caliphs' authority and the ideology of Paradise in the presence of both the religious and the secular realms of Islamic art. The Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus were built with the intention of demonstrating the wealth and power of the Umayyad caliphate. Under the guise of solely paying homage to Allah, Abd al-Malik and his son, al-Walid I adapted the forms and designs of their predecessors to legitimize their own imperial and religious rule, yet depicted paradisiacal rewards in an abstract manner.

Their inclusion of splendid celestial iconography via mosaic representations subconsciously manifested in their subjects the necessity to adhere to the demands of both Allah and his divinely appointed caliphs in order to redeem their heavenly reward. Staple motif of the Umayyad art became the vine rinceaux, a stylized vegetal motif of vines springing from a drinking vessel and filling the space in various degrees of complexity. This is a recurring theme in early Islamic art that refers to the description of paradise found in the Qur'an and provides an early example of the ways in which non-figural imagery became the insignia of imperial and religious power.

CHAPTER 4: SECULAR ART OF THE Umayyad ELITE

The political and secular realm of the Islamic elite was not established by Muhammad, but rather by his successors following the precedents set by the pre-Islamic ruling elite discussed in the first chapter. Privilege was an abundant theme in pre-Islamic court culture even in the Prophet's Meccan tribe. According to the earliest record of Muhammad's life, his presence was not sought in a palace, but at the mosque, and his home was no more than a humble private dwelling.⁹⁵ The mosque was the political center of early Islam and, unlike the palace, was open and available to all. Access to the Prophet was not controlled or denied, nor did there exist a sense of protocol or privilege identifying his importance within the space he occupied.⁹⁶ This concept of political and religious humility was not one that continued in the lives of Muhammad's caliphal successors. Instead, power, privilege, and leisure became the ultimate goal and signifier of the caliphate and the borrowed concept of court culture a necessity to impress and exhibit wealth and authority.

The secular realm of Islamic art exists well outside of major Islamic cities and away from the strict moral views of the caliphs' subjects. In addition to city palaces, early Umayyad Caliphs built isolated desert palaces meant for entertainment and self-indulgence. These pleasure palaces, comprised of several parts, most notably included a mosque, an audience hall, and a bath. The remains of these pleasure palaces provide insight into the opulent and exclusive lives of the caliphs and their court, actions which would otherwise appear hedonistic to their subjects. Situated in the isolation and dry climate of the desert, these palaces served as an oasis for the

⁹⁵ Michael Cook, "Did Muhammad Keep Court," *Court Cultures in the Muslim World: Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Albrecht Fuess and Jan-Peter Hartung (London: Rutledge, 2011) 25.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 26.

caliph and his court. The archaeological record of such desert palaces that are extant today includes the palaces of Qasr Mshatta, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Qasr Amra in Jordan, and the palace of Madīnat a-Zahrā in Spain. While figural imagery is expressly forbidden in the Hadith, these secular palaces include figural art of animals and depictions of what has become known as the princely cycle. The princely cycle refers to the iconography of activities enjoyed by the elite including scenes of hunting and banqueting, as well as painted figures of musicians, servers, dancers and other attendants.

With the exception of Qasr Mshatta, the surviving visual record of these pleasure palaces is almost exclusively decoration from the baths and the banquet halls within the complex—two locations distanced from the moral restrictions of Islam.⁹⁷ Within Muslim society, the bath was more than a device for cleanliness and ablution. The bath served a social function as a place for conversation, repose, and leisure. These spaces provided a place to relax, indulge, and entertain away from the prying eyes of orthodox devotees.

Qasr Mshatta, Jordan

Exquisitely carved in stone, the façade of Mshatta palace and mosque, built during the reign of caliph al-Walid II (743-744 C.E.), is all that remains of the Umayyad retreat from the city. Yet, its limited decoration reveals the iconography of secular Islamic art as strictly non-figurative as the religious. Carved within the stone is a large zig-zag pattern which repeats on the entirety of the façade (Figure 45). The zig-zag pattern and the vine rinceaux filling each triangle is reminiscent of the vault decoration on the Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek, Lebanon and is an interpretation in stone carving of motifs that appear in wood and mosaics in religious

⁹⁷ Qasr = castle.

art. The palace's close proximity to Baalbek implies the decoration was borrowed from the ancient Roman Baroque style. Within the center of each triangle of the zig-zag is a rosette, a typical embellishment within the Umayyad period.



Figure 45 Qasr Mshatta palace façade, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany, 8th century C.E.

In the lower frieze of the triangles, the space surrounding each rosette is filled with a variation of the same motif: vine rinceaux including animals. Three examples are shown here: a) a griffin and a lion drink from a basin while peacocks and pheasants perch on interlacing vines laden with clusters of grapes (Figure 46a, b, c) two griffins flank a vase from which a vine rinceaux springs forth surrounding the animals, with grapes in their mouths a small bowl holds three grape clusters while a pheasant perches on the spiraling vines.



Figure 46 a, b, c Qasr Mshatta Façade, animal and vine rinceaux motifs, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany, 8th century C.E.

The only location where this motif of animals and interlacing vines is missing is on the supposed qibla wall of the mosque. Instead, the animals are removed from the walls of the mosque and replaced with a non-figural motif similar to that of the Dome of the Rock, with blossoming vines of leaves and grapes burgeoning from a small vase (Figure 47). Mshatta's decoration is unusual in that it marks a clear understanding of the caliph of the appropriate imagery for each part of the palace. From a distance, there is very little distinction of different areas of the palace, yet non-figurative imagery is used for religious buildings while figurative imagery is visible on secular buildings. This indicates the caliph's desire to separate the secular and religious realms of his life into two distinct areas of the palace. This in turn reveals insight into the adopted notions of pre-Islamic kingship and privilege. The caliph, who serves as both the political and religious leader of Islam, is afforded the indulgences and luxuries of his predecessors, however, these secular indulgences must remain separate from the spiritual locations within the palace—the mosque.

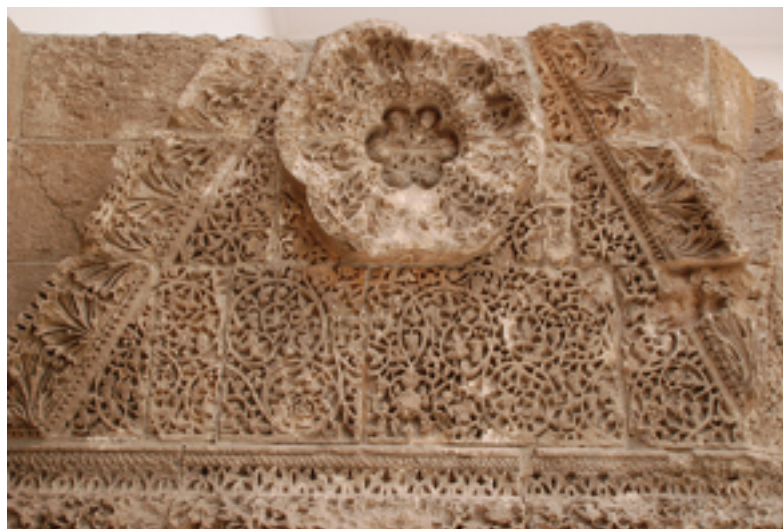


Figure 47 Qasr Mshatta Mosque Façade, Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany, 8th century C.E.

Khirbat al-Mafjar, Jordan

Another example of secular architecture is Khirbat al- Mafjar, a palace built by al-Walid II in the mid-eighth century C.E. The large, projecting porch and main entrance to the Bath Hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar demonstrates the spaciousness of the room prior to entering. As the first commissioned and completed space within a palace complex, the bath hall incorporates sixteen large pillars, eleven exedrae, six pools and a Diwan, or private reception room (Figure 48).

Unlike a public bath, the halls found at Khirbat al-Mafjar and various other desert palaces were complete with spaces not afforded to the general community. The architectural exaggeration, the various shapes and depths of the pool and the private entertaining rooms within the hall reveal the social and imperial function of the space; it is not intended for the public, but the elite and those they deem worthy.⁹⁸ In addition to its amenities, the Bath Hall was lavishly decorated with rich stucco carvings and stone sculpture, extensive floor mosaics and wall paintings. This decorative scheme is cause for alarm in reference to the moral expectations of the ruling class.

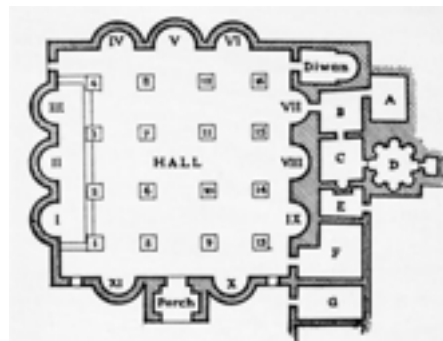


Figure 48 Plan of the bath at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Jordan, 8th century C.E.

⁹⁸ R.W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Majjar: An Arabian Mansion in the Desert* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959) 47.

The decorative scheme within the bath illustrates pleasures and entertainments afforded to the court including scenes of hunting, athletics, dancing, and drinking. Referred to as the princely cycle, the sculptures left behind at Khirbat al-Mafjar depict both the court, their entertainers, and their favored pastimes. Upon entering the bath via the large porch, the image of a caliph greets guests. He holds a scroll in his hand, wears an ornate garment, and stands on a pedestal of two lions, a symbol of his sovereignty and authority as the caliph, giving the figure an identity (Figure 49).⁹⁹ As the patron of this space, he establishes his authority on the space and the goings-on within.



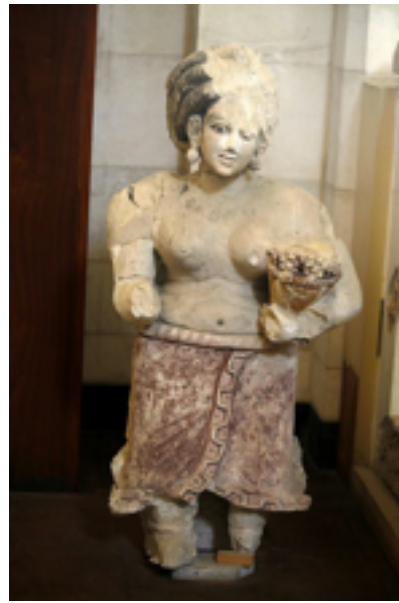
Figure 49 Caliph, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, 8th century C.E.

Within the room, there is nothing evocative of Islam or its morals or standards. Instead the room is reminiscent of the secular lifestyle of previous ruling classes. On the interior of the porch, within the pendentives of a lost dome, two athletes, hands above their heads, carry the weight of the dome, the space behind them ornamented with vines heavy with dangling grapes carved in stone; the stylized grapes and leaves are similar to Sassanian prototypes (Figure 50).

⁹⁹ R.W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al-Mafjar: An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 231.



Figure 50 Athletes of Khirbat al-Mafjar, Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, 8th century C.E.



Figures 51 Dancers/Servers, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, 8th century C.E.

In addition to the athletes are several female figures. While their location within the bath is unknown, their purpose is not (Figures 51). The female figures are similar in stance, ornament, and resemblance, they are bare above the waist, and covered by a wrap skirt from the waist down, they wear some form of jewelry—earrings, bangles, or a necklace—and their faces are made-up as seen at the dark line surrounding their eyes. Each woman carries a bouquet of flowers in one hand, perhaps indicating a performance, and in most cases the other hand is missing. It is possible to infer a cask or beaker of wine was held in the other hand. This is in part due to the reputation of the patron, al-Walid II, who is said to have lounged amidst the hall listening to musicians, watching dancers, and indulging in wine served by young men and women. After the performance the prince would plunge into a pool filled with wine.¹⁰⁰

While a wine cask or other object is not discernible in the hands of the female figures of Khirbat al-Mafjar, there exist similar figures from a lesser known desert palace Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi. These female figures, fashioned from stucco, are also bare from the waist up, adorned in jewelry and an ornate skirt, but hold in their hands a flask of wine (Figure 52). While a flask or flagon of wine is no longer present with the figures from Khirbat al-Mafjar (an extraordinary coincidence or the result of intentional damage given both figures are still holding bouquets of flowers), the existence of such an object in a nearby palace owned by the same royal family confirms the probability of the figures' occupation as servers. Thus the figures are symbols of the pleasures which exist and are to take place in the bath in service to the caliph and his court.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Ettinghausen, "The Throne and Banquet Hall of Khirbat al-Mafjar," *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. Jonathan Bloom (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002) 285.



Figure 52 Decorative women, dancers, servers, Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, National Museum Damascus, 8th century C.E.

Qasr Amra, Jordan

Of the remaining early Umayyad desert palaces, Qasr Amra, also built by al-Walid II in 743 C.E., maintains an extensive number of its original painted frescos, in situ, depicting the common indulgences and favored pastimes of the ruling caliph and his court. The walls of Qasr Amra are covered floor to ceiling with images of dancing women, servants, musicians, hunting and wrestling scenes, and, most importantly, a depiction of the patron and Caliph.

Though Qasr Amra was a palace complex complete with living quarters and a mosque, all that remains of the structure is the bath and a large audience hall just outside the bath. Exhibiting depictions of nude women grooming, bathing themselves and their children, the images within the bath are quite tame. If the images within the bath are indications of the purpose of the space as simply a place to bathe, the depictions outside of the bath in the large audience hall must serve a similar function.

The audience hall at Qasr Amra was a room in which the caliph would convene with his court to partake of the pleasures afforded a group of such high status. Walls within the room are

carpeted in vine scrolls and bunches of grapes, and the walls are strewn with the attendants and entertainers expected within such a magnificent space. Upon entering the audience hall, the image of the caliph is nearly hidden from viewers. However, taking into account the surrounding frescos and their gestures toward the caliph, his location and importance is revealed. Hidden in an alcove, the Caliph sits enthroned, beneath an arch supported by columns on either side, an architectural symbol of royal authority in Arab tradition and elsewhere (Figure 53).¹⁰¹



Figure 53 Qasr Amra, Alcove featuring the caliph reconstruction, Jordan, 8th century C.E.

The caliph is flanked by two male servants holding fly whisks. The caliph has one hand resting on his lap, while the other is brought in front of his chest presumably holding something, indiscernible because of the damage to the fresco (Figure 54). This artifact can be restored based on other precedents from Sassanian art. The motif of the seated ruler, holding a cup of wine and surrounded by musicians and entertainers was a very popular motif and occurs in two instances of Sassanian art. A seventh century plate (Figure 28) depicts a reclining Sassanian ruler holding

¹⁰¹ Garth Fowden, *Qusayr Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 116.

a cup of wine at a banquet. He is surrounded by musicians and attendants, and a vine heavy with ripe grapes hangs above him. On a second plate (Figure 30) depicting a similar theme, the Sassanian king, identified by his crown, is seated indoors on a carpet, with his hands in a similar gesture, holding a cup of wine with one of his hands. He is again surrounded by attendants and musicians, and there are two lions at his feet—a symbol previously seen in a representation of the caliph at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Figure 49). Other attendants and entertainers, musicians and dancers, along with animals are painted on the walls and vaults surrounding the small alcove in which the Caliph is seated. These figures are arranged in a diamond shaped motif with flora filling in the space (Figure 54).



Figure 54 Qasr Amra, Dancers and Musicians, Jordan, 8th century C.E.

Though the Caliph's exact identity is unknown, this iconographic program comes as no surprise since the Umayyad elite maintained a hedonistic reputation as drunkenness was a common shortcoming amongst the caliphs, an attitude confirmed also by their poetry:

Mules laden with liquor, their bags full of lutes
Pretty wantons exotic, with drums, strings and flutes;
What with thrumming and trilling and boozing and love
It's all fun for you now and in heaven above.¹⁰²

The rooms as well as the inclusion of these figural depictions mimic the ways in which the caliph and his court, ignoring Muhammad's prohibitions, were served and entertained and the ideal paradise enjoyed and depicted by the caliphs' ruling predecessors as mentioned in chapter one.

Madīnat al-Zahrā', Spain

Destroyed during a civil war fought for the succession to the throne, the palace city of Madīnat al-Zahrā' survives only in ruins, yet its legacy is preserved as the "epitome of the Islamic palace."¹⁰³ Located to the west of Cordoba, Madīnat Zahrā', built by Abd al-Rahman III in the mid-tenth century, became the cultural center of the Umayyad caliphate in Spain. Though the splendor and wealth of the caliph was known, mystery surrounded the palace city as the exquisite interiors, or the "elite zone," were seen only by the family, their personal slaves, the aristocracy, and select guests.¹⁰⁴ Like his forefathers, Abd al-Rahman III demonstrated his wealth and power to his newly conquered territory via the opulence and luxury of his palace city.

¹⁰² Robert Hillenbrand, "La Dolce Vita in Early Islamic Syria," *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. Johnathan Bloom (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 355.

¹⁰³ Renata Holod, "Luxury Arts of the Caliphal Period," *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilyn D. Dodds (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992) 41.

¹⁰⁴ Ruggles, D.F. "Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in al-Andalus." *Ars Orientalis* 23, (1993): 171.

The entirety of the palace served as a location in which the elite could emulate the pleasures of Paradise on earth. This attention to detail was well appreciated through the landscape design of the garden, the architecture of the palace with the most important rooms looking to the garden, and the architectural sculpture of the palace, the column capitals, and the decorative arts objects, such as pyxides, cups, and caskets, meant to enhance the luxury of the palace, yet also given as gifts to members of the ruling dynasty. A capital featuring four musicians set against a vegetal motif (Figure 55), presumably preserved from an arcade within the palace city or its surrounding mansions, is an example of the paradisiacal iconography incorporated in the palace and recalls images of dancers and musicians from the painted halls of Qasr Amra.



Figure 55 Capital with Four Musicians, 10th century, marble, Museo Arqueológico Provincial de Córdoba.

In addition to this paradisiacal iconography, several areas of the palace overlook the gardens placing emphasis on its significance among Islamic, palatial architecture. Abd al-Rahman III continued the tradition of building a luxurious oasis complete with the entertainments worthy of the court, yet unlike the Umayyad palaces of Syria situated in a barren

and dry desert climate, Madīnat al-Zahrā' was afforded the luscious green landscape of the Spanish countryside. It is within this climate that the splendors and pleasures of paradise take place within a garden of fragrant flowers, abundant fruits, streams and pools of water rather than the painted baths of the Syrian elite.

Madīnat al-Zahrā's legacy is remembered not merely in historical accounts for its splendor and extravagance, but also in the decorative arts and luxury goods left behind by its workshops. During the zenith of Abd al-Rahmān III's reign, his palace city was furnished with goods made of gold, silver, and other metals, textiles in wool and silk, and his guests were gifted with objects of marble, ivory, and glass. The workshops which produced these luxury items were introduced to the palace as not only a means of provision and embellishment of the palace, but to surpass the luxury of the competing Islamic capitals—the Abbasids in Baghdad and Samarra and the Fatimids of Cairo.¹⁰⁵

Decorative Arts, Madīnat al-Zahrā', Spain

Unlike their ancestors, the Umayyad elite of Spain relied not on the borrowed imperial forms and the magnificent mosaic decoration of religious architecture, but rather demonstrated their wealth, power, and authority through the extravagance of their Spanish palaces and the paradisiacal atmosphere within.¹⁰⁶ Decorative objects such as dinnerware, pyxides, caskets, and textiles are not extant or do not survive from the early Umayyad period in Syria; perhaps as a means to maintain piety amongst the public, exclusive court activities were concealed and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Artists were imported from Byzantium, Egypt, and Iran introducing the styles and materials of these ruling empires into al-Andalus.

¹⁰⁶ While not the only caliph to build an extravagant palace, the destruction of Abd al-Rahman III's palace as well as the Umayyad's legacy in Spain is referred to as a tale of divine justice. Madīnat al-Zahrā's excess and splendor and its king's extravagance exhibited earthy pleasure and self-importance which led to the downfall of the kingdom—the glory given not to Allah, but to the caliph.

isolated within desert palaces and their decoration. Under the new Umayyad elite in Spain, gifts depicting similar motifs to those found in early Umayyad palaces were presented to members of the ruling dynasty. Aromatic substances and cosmetics gained popularity as a means to promote health and well-being among the elite. Camphor, musk, and ambergris were among the most luxurious items typically gifted in ornately carved, ivory vessels featuring the names and ranks of the patron or the beneficiary.¹⁰⁷ Both the gift and its container served as a reminder of the wealth of the current ruler and the pleasures afforded him on earth.

The Pyxis of al-Mughīra

Cordobán pyxides made in the workshops of Madīnat al-Zahrā, consistently adhere to both a paradisiacal theme and themes of power and kingship.¹⁰⁸ Inscriptions on the pyxides often detail the commission date and its recipient as well as indicate the special occasion, such as weddings, births, or a coming of age, it commemorated.¹⁰⁹ The *Pyxis of al-Mughīra* was made for Abd- al-Rahman III's youngest son on his eighteenth birthday. The royal imagery that envelopes this pyxis promotes the caliphate's succession propaganda by depicting the young prince in well-known royal motifs: drinking in the gardens, hunting scenes, musicians and entertainers (Figure 56). Three beardless men appear in the scalloped medallion, with their missing beards indicative of their adolescence. The central, standing figure is holding a lute. The two young men are seated cross-legged on a throne platform, the youth on the left holds a goblet or beaker, presumably of wine, and a flowering branch (mimicking the Sassanian royal motifs mentioned in chapter one). The position or rank of the youth on the right, however is

¹⁰⁷ Renata Holod, "Luxury Arts of the Caliphal Period," 43.

¹⁰⁸ The pyxis is a cylindrical container, often with a flat or domed lid.

¹⁰⁹ Sheila S. Blair, "Ivories and Inscriptions from Islamic Spain," *Oriente Moderno* 23, no. 2 (2004): 381. The inscription should be read from the hinges, skipping the clasp, ending on the other side of the hinges.

unclear. While seated on the same level as the figure on the left, this figure holds a fan or fly whisk. The lack of a wine filled goblet in his hand informs his inferiority, yet his seated position may inform his rank.¹¹⁰ Depicting the caliph's eighteen-year-old son partaking in pleasures afforded a caliph indicates his status not only as part of the elite or wealthy class, but as the next in line to reign Al-Andalus. Though the prince is not the only seated figure enjoying the pleasures of the garden, the symbols in his hand, a beaker of wine and a flowering branch, are symbols of kingship directly adopted from Islam's predecessors. These symbols are indicative of the prince's status as the future political leader of Islam.



Figure 56 Pyxis of al-Mughīra, obverse and reverse, 968 C.E., ivory and metal, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France.

¹¹⁰ Oleg Grabar and Richard Ettinghausen's *Islamic Art and Architecture: 650-1250* claims the existence of the goblet informs the importance of the left figure over the right, while other sources including Franciso Prado-Vilar's article on ivory caskets of al-Andalus and the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain* exhibition catalogue suggest the two seated figures are of equal rank. The Department of Islamic Art in the Louvre Museum, where this pyxis is on view, suggests the figure on the right to be a member of the Abbasid elite, perhaps as a means to illustrate a continued threat to the Umayyad dynasty.

Pyxis of Ziyad al-Aflah

A second Cordobán pyxis offers insight into the influence and interpretation of royal motifs. Commissioned by Ziyad al-Aflah, prefect of the police, this pyxis is the only known object produced for a member of the court who was not in a ruling position. As is typical for an Islamic pyxis, an Arabic inscription providing the manufacture date as well as the recipient's name and a blessing is found on the domed lid of the container.¹¹¹

The container features three scalloped medallions, each encompassing a figure of high rank set among a dense background of vegetal reliefs and both real and mythical animals—griffins, does, lions, pheasants (figure 57). The three medallions depict Ziyad in positions of power, usually associated with the ruling dynasty: a drinking scene, a hunting scene, and a scene with Ziyad traveling on a palanquin. On one medallion, Ziyad is seated on a raised dais (Figure 57a) framed by attendants on each side, one holding a sword, the second offering a drink (Figure 57b). The flanking medallions feature a hunting scene, Ziyad astride a horse surrounded by prey, and Ziyad seated cross-legged in a palanquin atop an elephant, his hands in a similar gesture as the Islamic royalty—one hand in his lap, the other across his chest. While this iconography is not unusual on court ivories, it is unusual on an object given to or made for an individual who is not a member of the Umayyad dynasty.¹¹² Because Ziyad is presented as a prince or caliph in these images it is possible that the piece was not a gift, but instead commissioned by the police prefect. In that case, Ziyad's appropriation of iconography reserved

¹¹¹ "The blessing of Allah and prosperity and good fortune to Ziyad ibn Aflah, the prefect of police. Made in the year 359 (969 AD)."

¹¹² The Prefect of Police is a high-ranking official and a member of the royal court, however he does not belong to the royal family and thus has no claim as successor to the throne. Depicting himself surrounded by symbols reserved for the royal family demonstrates his desire to hold the position of caliph.

for sovereign rulers, implies his own ambitions towards the throne and the political power it represents.¹¹³



Figure 57 Pyxis of Ziyad al-Aflah: a. Ziyad carried on an elephant; b. Ziyad seated on a dias, 969-970, ivory and marble, Cordoban, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Pamplona Casket

The Pamplona casket was produced to commemorate the 1004 Umayyad victory over the Kingdom of Leon led by Abd al-Malik al-Muzaffar. The Pamplona Casket, rectangular in shape with a pyramidal lid, follows the graphic conventions of its predecessors: it is composed of nineteen ivory plaques that are carved with medallions interspersed with heavy vegetation and pheasants (Figure 58).

¹¹³ Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Art of Medieval Spain: AD 500-1200*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1993) 94. Ziyad ibn Aflah participated in a conspiracy led by al-Mansur to overthrow Umayyad caliph al-Hisham II (grandson of Abd al-Rahman III). Al-Mansur's grandsons eventually started a civil war with the reigning Umayyad's which ultimately led to the destruction of Madīnat al-Zahrā and the end of the Umayyad caliphal period in Spain.



Figure 58 Pamplona Casket, 1004 C.E., ivory, Museo de Navarra, Comunidad Foral de Navarra, Pamplona.

The medallions on the back depict a hunting scene in the center and two battle scenes on either side. The front of the casket presents court scenes entwined with vine rinceaux, vegetation, and small seated figures, seemingly musicians (Figure 59). The central medallion shows three young musicians seated informally. The medallion to the right depicts a sizable bearded caliph seated on a lion throne, holding a goblet of wine in his left hand, wearing a signet ring on his finger, and holding a branch in his right hand. He is flanked by two attendants, one holding a fly whisk, the other a bottle of perfume. The medallion on the left of the casket shows two young men, again seated on a lion throne, a palm tree engulfed in vines sprouting clusters of grapes between them. The two figures each hold a goblet gesturing towards each other as if in salute, the two apparently princes.



Figure 59 Pamplona Casket, front, 1004 C.E., ivory, Museo de Navarra, Comunidad Foral de Navarra, Pamplona.

According to the inscription, the Pamplona Casket was commissioned by Abd al-Malik al-Mazaffar, after he was named the *hajib*, a court official.¹¹⁴ The inscription credits him with his new title as *Sayf al-Dawla* (Sword of the State). Although, Abd al-Malik was not the caliph nor his successor, the inclusion of an image of the caliph both solidified his new title while indicating his expanding authority, ultimately usurping that of the caliph.

Conclusions

Though the earliest caliphs adhered to and even enforced the ban on wine and other intoxicants, the proliferation of iconography and writing retelling stories of the luxuries and pleasures of previous rulers was too much to ignore. Islamic court culture was never Muhammad's intent for his successors, but the role of caliph quickly altered from simply religious and spiritual leader to political force whose strength was determined by wealth and luxury. In order to demonstrate Islam as the succeeding political power of the region, the early Umayyads adopted the authoritative symbols of their predecessors, yet transformed this imperial iconography into one which adhered to their own spiritual beliefs—particularly that of a paradisiacal garden provided for and deserved by the ruling elite. Unlike the abstract representations of paradise found in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock and the Great Mosque of Damascus, the secular realm and private art of the Umayyad elite, hidden from the prying eyes of the lower classes of the followers of Islam precisely resembles the luxuries and privileges of the princely cycle and paradisiacal iconography developed by their Near East ancestors.

¹¹⁴ A *hajib* was a court official who controlled access to the caliph—the right hand of the caliph—and managed the household.

CHAPTER 5: Umayyad Influences in Late Islamic Art

This concept of propaganda is further demonstrated firstly in the iconography of private art commissioned by and for the successor caliphates to the Umayyads: The Abbasids and the Fatimids and, ultimately, the unaffiliated Norman Kingdom of Sicily.

The Abbasids

The Abbasid Caliphate claimed their right to rule in place of the Umayyads as true successors to the Prophet and members of the Holy Family.¹¹⁵ The Abbasids attacked the Umayyads character as unjust and immoral and asserted that the Umayyads used tax revenue to fund the construction of palaces for the elite.¹¹⁶ The Abbasid coup was successful, pushing the Umayyads out of Syria and establishing a new caliphate in Baghdad, Iraq that ruled from 750 C.E. to 1258 C.E.

Soon after the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate and against their criticism of the Umayyads, the Abbasids engaged themselves in the construction of lavish palaces and the patronage of luxury decorative arts that were used as equipment of the palaces and as political exchange gifts. Al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, built a large palace in Baghdad, Iraq in 762 C.E. It was described by poets as a paradise on earth in which no caliph would die.¹¹⁷

In addition to a monumental and luxurious palace, the Abbasids left behind an extensive collection of decorative objects, some of which were found at Madīnat al-Zahrā', the Umayyad palace in Spain. Guests of the Umayyad caliph were greeted by the incredible and paradisiacal

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 123.

¹¹⁶ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2004) 111.

¹¹⁷ James E. Lindsay, *Daily Life in The Medieval Islamic World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005) 100.

atmosphere of Madīnat al-Zahrā, reflected even in the dinnerware used during banquets. As a means to demonstrate the wealth of opposing caliphates, objects were traded and gifted between al-Andalus and Baghdad. These objects typically depicted similar iconography first adopted by the Umayyad Caliphate and eventually by the Abbasids.

A tenth century bowl of Iraqi origin found at Madīnat al-Zahrā, illustrates this appropriation and continuation of the princely cycle iconography by Abbasid artisans (Figure 60). Presented as a caricature, the central figure is depicted seated, flanked by two birds and holding a cup with his right hand and a flowering branch with his left. His position mirrors banqueting depictions of both Sassanian art and early Umayyad secular art, while the birds and the branch hint at paradise.



Figure 60 Bowl, found at Madīnat al-Zahrā, 10th century, Iraqi origin, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

It is clear that while the Abbasids emphasized their ancestry and right to the throne, they too participated in referencing the visual and cultural heritage of their predecessors to display both their power and wealth, but also their relationship with Allah and Muhammad as divinely appointed caliphs.

The Fatimids

The Fatimid Caliphate, (909-1171 C.E.), with its capital in Cairo, Egypt ruled over various regions, including present day Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, and Sicily trading extensively between these lands and as far as Spain.¹¹⁸ As a great manufacturing center of glass, ivory, silk, and pottery, Cairo became the cultural center of the Islamic world surpassing al-Andalus.¹¹⁹ While Fatimid art continues the use of vegetal forms and motifs, it exhibits a bold attitude in regards to utilizing figural imagery as well as depictions of hedonistic entertainments and wine drinking. This intricately carved ivory plaque (Figure 61) depicts a scarf dancer wearing an elaborately decorated garment and twisting her body mid-dance. She is reminiscent of the dancers and servers painted on the walls of Qasr Amra in service to the caliph. A bowl from the same period depicts a figure with a stern look on her face as she pours wine into a glass (Figure 62). Like the dancer, her clothing and jewelry is elaborate and greater attention to detail is paid to the drinking vessels.

¹¹⁸ Descendants of Muhammad's daughter Fatima.

¹¹⁹ Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture: 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 200.



Figure 61 Ivory Plaque, from Egypt, 11th-12th century, Museo Nazionale, Florence, Italy.



Figure 62 Glazed and lustre painted bowl fragment, 11th-12th century C.E., Museum of Islamic Art Cairo.

The Normans in Sicily

Perhaps the most unusual continuation of such images occurs not in the art of a preceding caliphate, but under the reign of an entirely unrelated kingdom. Norman adventurers from northern France, laid claim to Sicily in the early eleventh century, in service to the Pope.¹²⁰ Roger II, declaring himself king, erected a large palace. The palace chapel, Capella Palatina, (12th century C.E.) incorporated components and influences taken from Norman, Byzantine, and Islamic artistic styles in its decoration. The combination of artistic styles from three cultures within one room signifies the space as an instrument of political propaganda. King Roger II chose iconography which specifically referred to the ruling class of each culture. From his own culture, Roger II incorporated the Norman crown and Carolingian throne. From Byzantine art, King Roger chose the iconography of Christ crowning the emperor. From Islamic art, he chose the muqarnas ceiling incorporating images from the princely cycle (figures 63 and 64). Rather than choosing from the religious realm of Islamic art, depicting images of Paradise, Roger II chose a secular Islamic subject for the ceiling of the chapel.

¹²⁰ William Tronzo, *The Cultures of His Kingdom: Roger II and the Cappella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 5-6.



Figure 63 Cappella Palatina, Muqarnas Ceiling, wood, 12th century, Palermo, Sicily.



Figure 64 Cappella Palatina, Muqarnas Ceiling, wood, 12th century, Palermo, Sicily.

The muqarnas ceiling, executed by Fatimid artists, follows a similar program to the princely cycle frescos of Quasar Amra.¹²¹ Depictions include scantily clad dancers, musicians, drinking, and images of the hunt, all highlighted by a golden background as if in another world (Figure 65). Roger II is also depicted taking part in the luxurious pastimes of a divine ruler flanked by two attendants, one filling his cup with unlimited wine, the other playing soothing music. He is dressed in a similar fashion to a Muslim caliph aside from his Norman crown (Figure 66). Placing himself in the position of the Byzantine emperor and the Muslim caliph, Roger II pays homage to a program of royal patronage while indicating his role as successor to these empires in an attempt to declare his legitimacy over Islam



Figure 65 Musician and dancer, Muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, 12th century, Palermo, Sicily.

¹²¹ Ernst J. Grube, *The Painted Ceilings of the Cappella Palatina* (Genova: Bruchettini Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, 2005) 16-18.



Figure 66 Roger II, Muqarnas ceiling, Cappella Palatina, 12th century, Palermo, Sicily.

Conclusions

The choice of the Abbasids, the Fatimids and the Normans to continue the iconography of the princely cycle illustrates the significance and understanding of an iconography which began with the ancient empires of the Near East, was adopted and adapted by the Umayyad elite to the goals of Islam, continued by the Abbasids and ultimately expanded and traded extensively by the Fatimids, until its influence and radius reached non-Islamic courts.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

The theme of wine drinking in a paradisiacal setting is abundant in both the religious and secular art of Islam. Religious art as demonstrated in mosaics, wooden beams and soffits in the early mosques and shrines in Jerusalem and Damascus, exhibit the vine rinceaux motif: stylized vine tendrils, richly decorated with jewels springing from drinking vessels and scroll symmetrically filling a blank background. These vine rinceaux often support royal tiaras, crowns and other iconographic symbols of royalty tying the motif both the paradise as well as the reigning political authority of Islam. Secular art as demonstrated in frescos, mosaics and the decorative arts from palaces and desert palaces, such as Madīnat al-Zahrā', Qasr Mshatta, Qasr Amra and Khirbat al-Mafjar demonstrate more explicitly the act of banqueting and drinking in a paradisiacal setting full of orderly vegetation and animals. Banqueters are comfortably seated, attended by entertainers, musicians, dancers and servers. While at a first glance, there is a substantial contrast between the aniconic religious Islamic art and the figurative secular Islamic art yet, both adhere to the same theme: participation in the luxuries and pleasures of banqueting and drinking wine.

This ancient theme was initially developed in Mesopotamia as early as the second half of the third millennium B.C.E. Scenes of banqueting were reserved for the elite and the king, who was the divine representative of god on earth. The theme was further developed by the Assyrians, who placed the banquet in a carefully landscaped, peaceful and well-watered walled garden. Both the notion of paradise and the notion of banqueting and wine drinking in luxury were adopted and continued by the Persian, who developed the term “paradise” to describe a walled garden, the Greco-Romans, and the Sassanian rulers. Thus, this themes became a

recurring motif in their art. At the same time, the Egyptians already incorporated the theme of banqueting in the afterlife as demonstrated in the main iconography found in tomb frescoes and stele since the old kingdom. This notion of the afterlife, with the eternal supply and consumption of food and drink referring to the banquets of earth was eventually adapted by christianity in late antiquity. These three variations on the theme of banqueting, banqueting reserved for the elite, banqueting enjoyed in a garden, and banqueting in eternity in the afterlife, constituted the cultural heritage of Arabia at the moment of the rise of Islam and its early expansion under the Umayyads.

Islam brought together all of these traditions and ideas under one monotheistic religion and adopted and adapted these notions to serve its own purposes: to unite the masses of tribal people living in the desert, and controlling their lusts and behavior to allow the religion to progress. The holy text of Islam, the Qur'an, provides an image of banqueting in Paradise as Allah's ultimate reward. This image was now promised to the entirety of the population who observed the Five Pillars of Islam, obeyed Allah and the Qur'an and lived according to Muhammad's example. These are the righteous who will enter paradise after death and will spend eternity reclining on soft and supple couches, eating ripe fruits and drinking wine.

The Hadith outlines Muhammed's example and his prohibitions to the believers in order to secure their entry to paradise. Among these is the consumption of wine and other alcoholic drinks during one's lifetime. Thus, wine becomes a substance reserved for and permitted only in paradise. It is this paradise that religious art illustrates and offering a visual image to the believers in order to encourage them to live righteously on earth so that they achieve the ultimate goal of eternal life in Paradise.

The palaces of the caliphs illustrate luxurious banquets taking place in paradise, and even include paradisiacal gardens themselves, much like the city palace Madīnat al-Zahrā' in Córdoba, Spain. Seemingly a blatant disregard for Muhammad's teachings and the Qur'an, the Umayyad elite adopted a lifestyle and iconography displaying their wealth and glory as the rulers of Islam. It was not the prohibitions outlined in the Hadith, established for the masses to follow, that informed their lifestyle and the decoration of their palaces, but the well-established ideas about kingship developed in the Near East first by the Sumerians. The caliphs saw themselves as the rightful representatives of God on earth in a religion and form of governance that rightfully succeeded all previous religions and empires in the region. Therefore, it only made sense to to employ a well established iconography of drinking in a paradisiacal setting surrounded by servants, dancers, and musicians, to further demonstrate the position of the caliph as the succeeding political authority to the empires that came before.

Islam's predecessors demonstrated their privilege and power and even equivalence to their gods via depictions of banqueting, often in a garden surrounded by attendants and musicians, and imbibing wine, a substance considered divine. These early depictions found on cylinder seals, in chapel tombs, on palace walls, festival pavilions, temples, and dinnerware, were viewed by and imbedded in the minds of foreign ambassadors and the upper class in an attempt to emphasize and secure their power. Thus, these images were indeed a sort of propaganda amongst the ruling class of each empire.

As early as the eighth century, the Umayyad caliphs and princes built lavish and exclusive desert palaces far from the prying eyes of there subjects. The remains of these palaces, figures of dancers and athletes, servers pouring wine, musicians and the caliph drinking amongst

his court, demonstrate a continued notion of kingship as a divine entity whose privilege and promise of paradise extends to an earthly setting. Allah has promised to his believers a lavish and comfortable dwelling place, an oasis of sorts, a hope to those living in poverty and an arid climate. To the poor layman, paradise is their ambition, the ultimate goal in obedience to Allah, yet to the divinely appointed caliph paradise is a place to imitate on earth. It is this divine appointment which grants the elite the authority to line in paradise on earth. Though the Qur'an and the Hadith call for believers to live modestly for the rewards in Paradise are great, the elite do not fall under this decree. The secular and private art of the Umayyad royal elite, thus follows the cultural and propagandistic traditions of previous empires of the Near East in order to secure authority among the great empires who came before. Adopting ancient ideas about kingship, the caliphs excluded themselves from this mortal promise, ignoring the Qur'an's prohibition and creating a paradise on earth. The early Umayyad's continued an ancient tradition of wine drinking and banqueting, adopting an propagandistic iconography of pleasure and power which continued to develop in the arts of the succeeding caliphates and was eventually adopted by non-Islamic courts as the ultimate standard of court culture.

In conclusion, the iconography of paradise, having such a long history in the Near East, was adopted and adapted in Islamic art to serve different purposes: in religious art to give the promise of afterlife for those who led their lives according to the Five Pillars of Islam, and in secular art to communicate the supremacy of the caliphate over other contemporary and ancient political powers.

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