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The Long Tradition of the Cycle of Paintings of Qusayr 'Amra

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Abstract The cycle of paintings of the bathhouse of Qusayr 'Amra (eighth century, Jordan) has been the object of several attempts of interpretation. Scholars have usually limited its contextualization to the large family of Roman and late antique bathhouses to its plan and hydraulic features. The present article argues instead that late antique examples of the same architectural typology might have provided models and patterns for the paintings of Qusayr 'Amra too. Agreeing with a common late antique artistic practice, legends were instead used in the painting in order to add and explain new and unusual themes inserted among the traditional repertoire.

Keywords Qusayr 'Amra. Bathhouses. Bathhouses decoration. Late antiquity. Early Islam. Bilingual inscriptions. Representation of kings.

1 Introduction: the Liminality of Qusayr 'Amra

> For the Vandals, since the time when they gained possession of Libya, used to indulge in baths, all of them, every day, and enjoyed a table abounding in all things, the sweetest and best that the earth and sea produce. And they wore gold very generally, and clothed themselves in the Medic garments, which now they call 'seric', and passed their time, thus dressed, in theaters and hippodromes and in other pleasurable pursuits, and above all else in hunting. And they had dancers and mimes and all other things to hear and see which are of a musical nature or otherwise merit attention among men. (Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, II.6.6)

In this renowned passage, Procopius lingers on the lifestyle of Vandals after they settled in the Roman territory during late antiquity. They are described having adopted several features of Roman lifestyle, from food and dressing habits to bathhouse attendance, to theatre, hunting, and cir-

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cus spectacles (Dunbabin 1989, p. 7). To a certain extent this sixth-century description of the Romanization of Vandals might also be considered valid for those Arabs that moved north in the seventh-eighth century from the Arabian Peninsula to the provinces of Arabia and Palestine: a passion for bathing, hunting games, horse-races, luxury dresses, mimic and music performances emerges as one of the key-elements of early Muslim courtly life-style in archaeological findings, textual sources and visual evidence.[1]

Bathing culture is perhaps the most striking of these elements, especially with regard to the Umayyad court, the Damascus-based dynasty ruling the Islamic world from 661 to 750. Bathhouses were introduced in the eastern Mediterranean area in the second century and the so-far-known seventeen bathhouses built by the Umayyads testify the last phase of an architectural typology that provided the social space for entertainment as well as care for hygiene and health (Fournet 2012, pp. 330-31). Whereas neither the technique nor the social function of bathing changed drastically from the Roman to the Umayyad time, a hiatus is offered by the archaeological evidence in the area between the eight and the mid-eleventh century, when bathhouses started to appear again showing the full development of the new heating technique of steam (typical of the Islamic *hammam*s) replacing the hypocaust (typical of the Roman *balnea*) (Charpentier 1995, p. 233; Fournet 2012, p. 332). The first important point here is to what extent on a typological level, despite some minor changes, the bathhouses built by the early Muslim elite belong to a building type that, in the eastern Mediterranean, was introduced under the Romans and developed during late antiquity.

Qusayr ʻAmra, located 80 km east of ʻAmman in Jordan, is one of the seventeen Umayyad foundations and perhaps the most renowned among them for its exceptional structural integrity and the cycle of paintings preserved in its interior (fig. 1).[2] The earliest scholarly assessments of Qusayr ʻAmra reveal a miscomprehension about its art historical categorization that highlight its being on the verge of two eras (according to the

1 Hippodromes were uncovered in the cities of Raqqa and Samarra (Milwright 2010, pp. 81-2); mimic and music performances are described in poetry attributed to the early Islamic period (Fowden 2004a, pp. 64-69); hunting games are amongst the favourite subjects in the paintings of Qusayr ʻAmrah as well as in contemporary poetry (Fowden 2004a, pp. 85-114).

2 The bibliography on Qusayr ʻAmrah from the time of its discoveries by Alois Musil in year 1898 is enormous. After the seminal book by Fowden (2004), it is worth mentioning Nadia Ali's works (2006; with Guidetti 2016); Macchiarella (with Guidetti 2007); Di Branco (2007); Taragan (2008) and Fontana (2012). More recently the sensational discoveries obtained by the restoration of the paintings started in 2008 have been exposed in lectures and conferences (such as the international conference entitled «The Colours of the Prince. Conservation and Knowledge in Qusayr ʻAmra» held on the 22 and 23 October 2014 at the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro in Rome).

Figure 1. The bath complex of Qusayr ʻAmra, Jordan (source: Gertrude Bell Archive; X 008, Album X 1913-1914)

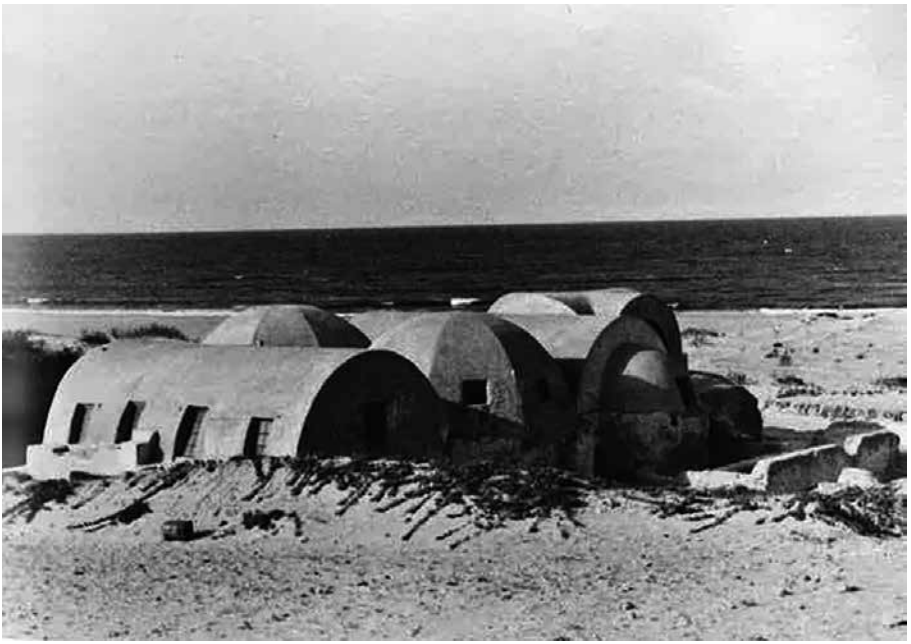

Figure 2. The ʻHunting baths' complex of Lepcis Magna, Lybia (source: Bianchi, Musso 2012, fig. 15)

modern arrangement of history). The miscomprehension of its chronology is ironically complementary to the earliest interpretations of another bath complex, the so-called 'Hunting Baths' of Lepcis Magna (Libya). The latter is a Roman bathhouse, also exceptional among the spectrum of Roman and late antique foundations for both the architectural integrity and the preservation of its cycle of paintings (fig. 2).

Qusayr 'Amra was initially misinterpreted as a late antique building. Alois Musil in 1902 assigned the bathhouse to the Ghassanids, an Arab group settled North of Arabia during late antiquity (Musil 1902, p. 47). Wickhoff in 1907 dates the paintings, on a stylistic level, to the fourth-fifth century and further defines the cycle as «an art of documents» (as opposed to an art of artworks) because Qusayr 'Amra is one of those creations that «illustrates the engagement with problems that have already been solved; it leads up to periods that use forms belonging to developments that have already been reached their conclusion» (Wickhoff in Musil 1907, 1, p. 203; Müller in Musil 1907, 1, pp. II-III; the English translation is from Rampley 2013, p. 183). Let's turn to the 'Hunting Baths' of Lepcis Magna: when the vaults and domes of the building were firstly discovered in the 30s of the twentieth century they were described as «squat and irregular agglomerations of geometric solids with their roofs divided into as many vaults as there are rooms […] the impression not of antique works, but of constructions built by the Arabs» (Giovannoni 1937, as quoted in Munzi 2012, p. 19).[3]

We therefore face an early Islamic building interpreted as a late antique one, and a late Roman one (the Hunting Baths remained in use from the late second to the fourth century) interpreted as an Islamic one (though, in the 30s, 'Arab' was preferred to 'Islamic'). The visibility of the geometrical volumes of vaults and domes on the exterior of the building and the absence of a unified classical exterior made the 'Hunting Baths' different from the cityscape of the Roman city (Ward-Perkins, Toynbee 1949, p. 167; Wilkes 1999, pp. 17-9). Though later Islamic architecture in North Africa, with its medley of juxtaposed squared geometrical forms sometimes crowned by domes, surely had a role in the evaluation of the Hunting Baths as 'Arab' architecture, these were the very same qualities offered by Qusayr 'Amra in which barrel vaults, semi-domes and domes reflect on the exterior the volume of the inner space of the bathhouse. For instance, Gertrude Bell in the year 1914 was fascinated by Qusayr 'Amra structural qualities rather than by its paintings:

3 «Basse ed irregolari associazioni di solidi geometrici con le coperture frazionate in altrettante volte quanti sono gli ambienti… … l'impressione non di opere antiche, ma di costruzioni eseguite dagli Arabi». The English translation is by Munzi (2012, p. 19), who further discusses the earliest reactions and comments at the time the building was discovered.

> I changed camels with Ibrahim and rode on with 'Ali getting to 'Amra about 2. It lies delightfully in the valley bed over which are scattered butm. I photographed till 4 – badly I fear. The dome is on pendentives. Both these and the cross vault are constructed like the Ukhaidir counterparts, with a bracket of horizontal stones cut to the shape of bricks. No bricks here. All the vaults constructed of thin brick-like stones. Wonderful sunset. This was the first really warm day. Clear glow lasting till 5.45. (Diaries, 2 January 1914)[4]

Indeed, despite the chronological and geographical gap between the 'Hunting baths' of Lepcis Magna and Qusayr 'Amra, the two buildings clearly belong to the same architectural family. If this continuity is true for the function of the place, the hypocaust technique of its heating system and for its architecture, why should we not consider the possibility that also the decoration of these bathhouses was organized according to a similar framework? Thébert argues that, with regard to the heating system, there is evidence for the existence of peripatetic teams of skilled workers who moved from one construction site to another (Thébert 2003, p. 471). What about teams of masons, stoneworkers, mosaicists, and painters?

While there is no doubt that Qusayr 'Amra belongs to the final period of the Roman and late antique bathhouses – and in fact the Jordanian Umayyad bath complex is often featured at the very end of volumes on bathhouses in Antiquity (see, for instance, Yegül 1992, pp. 339-49) –, with regard to its artistic program scholars are not unanimous. While Byzantine art scholars see its iconographic cycle as belonging to the late antique tradition (despite its Islamic date of foundation) (Doncel-Voûte 1988, pp. 463-64; Piccirillo 1993, pp. 343-53; Paribeni 2004), Islamic art scholars prefer instead to highlight the changes allegedly brought by early Muslims in the process of adapting motifs from the late antique traditions. This latter tendency is thoroughly explained by Rabbat in one article devoted to the mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus: «a more critical generation of Islamic art historians attempted in the second half of the twentieth century to soften the negative effect usually associated with the notion of copying by proposing an intentionality to it, thus restoring to the Umayyads a certain cultural and artistic agency» (Rabbat 2003, p. 79).

Before the full assessment of the inscriptions carried out by the last restoration process of Qusayr 'Amra,[5] in the case of the Jordanian bathhouse

4 Document available at the Gertrude Bell Archive website (`http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/`). It should be noted that also Lawrence stopped by Qusayr 'Amra in the year 1918; his brief description focuses only on the paintings: «we lay [...] puzzling out the worn frescoes of the wall, with more laughter than moral profit» (passage quoted by Fowden 2004a, p. xxi).

5 The recent campaign of restoration, started in 2008 and carried out by the Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione ed il Restauro and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan

the Umayyad agency cited by Rabbat was interpreted as the effort by the patron to depict himself, as well as events of his biography, on the walls of the small thermal complex. The champion of such an interpretative trend was undoubtedly Grabar who, in an article devoted to the hunting scenes of Qusayr ʻAmrah, argues that at least some of the scenes depicted ʻreal and concrete eventsʼ immortalizing the patron of the complex during his pastime activities (Grabar 1988, p. 167). To look for external models is superfluous, Grabar adds, as the paintings are the result of the recollection of events just happened, events vivid in the memory of the very same people who commissioned and benefitted from the paintings.

While each scholar approached the figurative cycle of Qusayr ʻAmra with his or her own sensibility and background, it remained urgent interpreting the paintings at the light of the biography of the patron. If the primary goal was to give as much agency as possible to early Muslims,[6] the written sources considered helpful for scrutinizing the social context of the paintings were literary Arabic texts, mainly poetry, composed in the Abbasid period and referred to the deeds of the previous dynasty, the Umayyads. Despite such sources are helpful to reconstruct the social context of the early Islamic period, it should also be recalled that the memory of the Umayyads was often manipulated by later authors, who also speciously depicted its elite as impious and devoted to vices.

Such a scheme has been recently challenged by Ali. She contends that the artistic practice of those in charge of decorating the small thermal complex played a decisive role in the adaption of a limited number of usual decorative schemes to the walls of Qusayr ʻAmra. She urges to downplay the agency of the patron and focus instead on the existence of a limited range of formal possibilities related to the architectural surface and, though to a smaller extent, to the function of the space to be decorated. These schemes were part of the operational procedure carried out by teams of artisans required to decorate the architectural space (Ali 2006; Ali, Guidetti 2016).

under the supervision of the World Monuments Fund, is summarized in this video: http://www.wmf.org/video/re-discovering-Quṣayr-%E2%80%98amra-conservation-early-islamic-site-jordan (2016-01-07).

6 See, for instance, Bisheh with regard to Qasr al-Hallabat, another eighth-century Umayyad foundation: «The important question raised by this mosaic, however, has not to do with its prototypes and sources, but with whether those borrowed elements had been assimilated, adapted to a new context, and given a specific meaning» (Bisheh 1993, p. 53).

2 Figurative Cycles in the Bathhouses

Scholarship on bathhouses emerged in the 90s in parallel to works on domestic spaces (DeLaine 1999, p. 7). Dunbabin stresses how the decoration of the complexes, featuring a «remarkable uniformity and continuity of attitude that characterizes so large a span of time and space», is often overlooked in favour of a focus on technical and typological aspects (1989, p. 11).

One of the reasons for such a gap in the scholarship is the general lack of well-preserved thermal complexes. Written sources rarely report the subjects of paintings and mosaics within thermal complexes. Exceptions do exist: the most renowned text is by John of Gaza about a bathhouse usually interpreted to be located in Antioch (Krahmer 1920). The reconstruction of the decoration after sixth-century John of Gaza's text suggests the existence of a dome characterized by a cosmological composition entirely inspired by the classical legacy. A further text is by Sidonius Apollinaris, a fifth-century Gallo-Roman aristocrat and bishop, who, in a letter, invites his friend Domitius to join him in his country-estate at Avitacum, in today Auvergne. Praising the beauty and the bounty of the place, Sidonius offers a description of the thermal complex at his country-estate. «The interior walls are unpretentiously covered with plain white stucco», Sidonius stresses and «no frescoed scene obtrudes its comely nudities, gracing the art to the disgrace of the artist» he continues. «No painted actors in absurd masks, and costumes rivalling Philistio's gear with colours gaudy as the rainbow. …No pugilists or wrestlers intertwining their oiled limbs in those grips which, in real bouts, the gymnasiarch's chaste wand unlocks the moment the enlaced limbs look indecent» (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Letters*, II.2). Sidonius emphasizes the absence of what an educated person in the fitfth century was expected to find decorating a bathhouse complex. The picture drawn by Sidonius Apollinaris is a negative of contemporary bathhouses, suggesting that there was a limited range of subjects, which patrons – and artists hired to decorate them – were supposed to select and interpret within each thermal building.

In the case of the Hunting Baths of Lepcis Magna, Musso has recently argued how hunting and gladiatorial scenes were not an exclusive feature of the extra-muros complex of Lepcis Magna (fig. 3), but, as the floor mosaics in the Villa of Wadi Lebda show, «in principle the choice of this iconography [*gladiatores*, *venationes*] should be attributed to the widespread taste for shows of this kind» (Musso 2012, p. 37). *Spectandi voluptas*, the delight derived from attending cruel spectacles, was the social phenomenon that helps explaining the dissemination of such specific themes up to the early Islamic period. In Qusayr 'Amrah the hunting scenes are concentrated in the basilica hall and consist of different scenes of a hunting campaign. One scene depicts a huntsman accompany by a pack of saluki dogs, two further panels display hunting with nets (the first is a sort of panorama scene of a

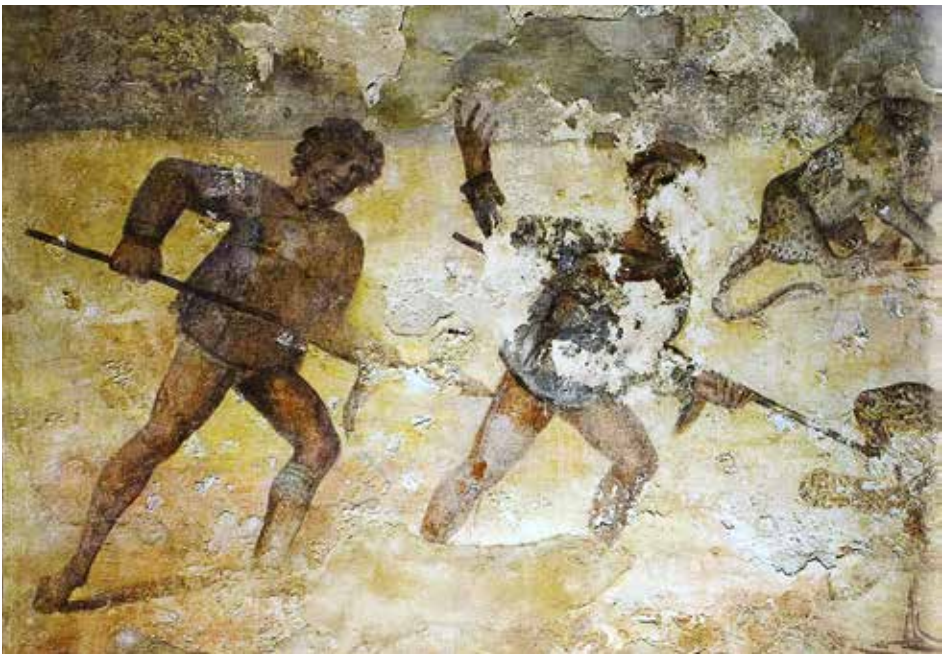

Figure 3. Detail of a hunting scene in the bathhouse of Lepcis Magna (Bianchi Musso 2012, pl. IX)

wide hunting net in which chasing takes place, while the second one is a close-up with men killing onagers with spears with a focus on one central bearded figure) and one final depiction shows a bearded man with two assistants portrayed while slaughtering the preys (Fowden 2004a, pp. 92-102). Despite these scenes clearly portray a sort of hunting narrative, the absence of any inscription and legend make difficult to identify specific figures or events, perhaps – as argued by Grabar (1988) – related to the patron of the Jordanian hunting lodge. The absence of any landscape or architectural background helps focusing on the gestures and poses of the hunters, exactly as in the case of the scene depicting the gymnasium activities. These look as genre scenes related to favourite pastimes that were often celebrated within bathhouses.

Other recurrent themes for bathhouses were Nilotic scenes (present in Qusayr ʻAmra, below the enthroned prince also identified as part of the cycle of Jonah), toilette or bathing scenes (also present in Qusayr ʻAmra), mythological scenes, including depictions of Dionysus (a Dionysian scene might be the subject of the painting in the tepidarium of Qusayr ʻAmra; see Winkler-Horacek 1998 and Macchiarella, Guidetti 2007), wrestling and boxing scenes (also appearing in Qusayr ʻAmra) (Dunbabin 1999, pp. 117, 313; Thébert 2003, pp. 163, 453-454). Finally, as revealed by Ali

Figure 4. Detail of a hunting scene in the bath complex of Qusayr ʻAmra, Jordan (source: Jeff Rozwadowski)

(Ali, Guidetti 2016) the depiction of the months appears in Qusayr ʻAmra, a subject featured in the thermal complex of the months at Thenae in Tunisia (Thébert 2012, pp. 161-162).

A whole vocabulary of painted scenes seem to appear in Qusayr ʻAmra because part of the ʻideaʼ of a thermal complex during late antiquity. This ʻideaʼ of bathhouses included specific spaces, hydraulic technique and decorative themes. If teams of skilled workers specialized in providing bathhouses with the necessary heating technology circulated from one site to another, the same procedure might hold true with regard to teams of painters who brought to the new construction site their expertise, a set of choices for the decoration and their own specific way of crafting painting. In other words, it is likely that the hunting and wrestling scenes in Qusayr ʻAmra, but this might be true for several other subjects, appear because these were subjects that were embedded in the very same idea of a bathhouse according to the taste and the mentality of that age. And, needless to say, the taste and mentality of patrons, such as al-Walid ibn Yazid, was still informed by a set of elements (education, idea of luxury, proper pastimes) inscribed into the horizon of late antiquity. Its ʻextraordinarinessʼ lies in its state of conservation and, for those who are not keen or used to think

of early Islam as a late antique phenomenon, in its Islamic date as well. The latter point has often caused disconcert among scholars. A sense of disorientation several scholars cope with by attributing the 'non-Islamic' character of the paintings (such as nudity or mythological scenes related to Dionysus) to the weak-minded, vicious psychology of its patron.Such an approach, however, relegates the art of Umayyad bathhouses to the sphere of the presumed whims of the patrons (cf. Ali, Guidetti 2016).

The approach suggested here, instead, gives priority to the artistic context in which Umayyad bathhouses were built and decorated. Such interpretative frame does not exclude the possibility of development or change. For instance, the plans of several Umayyad bathhouses show a gradual decreasing of the size of hot rooms and an increasing of the *apoditerium* (Fournet 2012, pp. 333-34).

The same is true for the cycle of paintings: painters adapted their expertise to the new construction site and were ready to modify, include and exclude subjects according to the local circumstances. One way in order to flag the insertion of uncommon subjects was to add legends beside the subjects.

3 The Role of Legends and the Panel of the Six Kings

With regard to the personalization of bathhouses, it has been suggested that one of the functions of legends was to make explicit the addition to the usual decorative scheme of subjects and features to which the audience was not used. In one Roman villa near Valladolid (Spain) an episode from the Iliad is rubricated in both Latin and Greek in order to please a diversified audience (Dunbabin 1999, p. 322). Boissier (1925, p. 157) emphasizes this very same concept discussing the case of the bathhouse complex of Pompeianus in Tunisia in which legends help at portraying the owner himself together with the names of his best dogs and horses. In the above-mentioned Hunting Baths of Lepcis Magna legends in Latin help at identifying three wild animals and some of the gladiators. While animals seem to have been identified through their physical qualities (rapidity, quickness), the gladiators are recorded through sobriquets (*signa*), in order to give «a more vivid picture to a rather commonplace topic» (Di Vita Evrard 2012, p. 75).

In Qusayr 'Amra, Greek legends illustrate the personifications of philosophy, history and poetry (Fowden 2004a, pp. 87-8), while Greek and Arabic legends elucidate the six figures portrayed in the basilica hall in the position of paying homage to a seventh figure (either the one depicted enthroned in the central alcove or the owner of the complex in the flesh). The latter panel is one of the most renowned pictures of the complex and consists of six royal figures arranged into two rows, each figure stretching its hands with the palms turned upwards. As thoroughly examined by

Fowden the dresses seem to belong to the eastern Roman tradition with an inner tunic covered by the outer mantle (*chlamis*) fastened with a fibula (2004, p. 200; 2004b, pp. 282-3). The bad state of preservation does not allow to fully understanding all features; however, it appears clear that the legends helped in clarifying the identity of each figure. The readable inscriptions say the figures are Caesar, Roderic, Khusraw and the Negus. In the case of Khusraw the identification is also suggested by the headgear, which features a crescent moon and traces of wings on either side (a common element of Sasanian crowns). The identity of the two further figures remain hypothetical; Van Berchem (1909, pp. 367-70) argued they might have been the titles of rulers such as the Khaqan (ruler of Turkish peoples) and the Chinese or Indian ruler. More recently, Di Branco (2007) tried to make sense of one further inscription revealed by Littmann but since then not properly discussed in the scholarship on Qusayr ʻAmra. The Arabic inscription was painted on the garment of the figure labelled as Caesar and read Muqawqis, which is the title of the patriarch of Alexandria according to the Arabic tradition. The presence of such an inscription makes unstable the identity of one of the figures; a puzzle explained by Di Branco by distinguishing between two distinct phases. The earliest phase would have featured the patriarch of Alexandria, whereas in the second phase the identity of the same figure would have been transformed into Caesar.

With regard to the meaning of the panel, interpretations move from a depiction of the kings of the earth paying homage or welcoming the new Arab-Muslim ruler (or dynasty), to a portray of the enemies defeated by the Arab-Muslims during the process of the conquest, to an accurate picture of real royal figures who had been in contact with early Muslims (Fowden 2004a, pp. 197-226). By making sense of the inscription 'Muqawqis' on the garment of Caesar, Di Branco (2007) argues the first phase of the painting portrayed the diplomatic missions ordered by Muhammad in the year 6 of the Hijra to the ruler of Yamama (Arabia), Muqawqis, Caesar, the ruler of Ghassanids, the Negus and Cosroe. Such interpretation also implies that Roderic was added in the second phase of the painting (when the Muqawqis was transformed into Caesar, though it is not clear what happened to the first Caesar in the second phase) and contends that the enthroned figure in the central alcove was Muhammad himself.

All interpretations agree in considering Roderic a historical figure, namely the Visigothic king defeated in the year 711 by the Muslims advancing into Spain. Following this, the year 711 is also used as a *post quem* date for the making of the cycle of paintings.

It is however striking to note that all legends refer to titles and not to historical figures. All legends, including Muqawqis, share this aspect. Why, then, did the real Roderic enter into the scene? Would it be possible to consider that in the case of the Visigoth king, the name of one ruler – similarly to what happened to Cosroe – came to mean the title of the rulership? If so,

the panel would look more consistent. The name Roderic is mentioned by Procopius in the sixth century with regard to Spain (Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, VII.13.29).[7] It is however a Goth warlord and not a king to be mentioned and such a reference would hardly be known by early Muslims. Roderic was the first Visigoth ruler encountered by the Arabs, who before Islam had not direct contacts with the Goth people living in Spain (König 2015, pp. 153-61). For this reason, it might be that the name Roderic served to identify a kingship for which not any other term was available yet. Later Islamic sources offer evidence of this: Roderic was the name indicating the Visigoth rulership and not, or not only, the historical king Roderic (Fowden 2004a, p. 205). Al-Mas'udi (tenth century) makes this very clear:

> The ruler of al-Andalus was Roderic (Ludhriq) – and such was the name of all the rulers of al-Andalus. Some argue their ancestors are to be found among the Ashban, a population descendent from Japhet son of Noah of which no traces remain; however most Muslims living in al-Andalus think they are part of the Galicians, one of the peoples among the Franks. The last Roderic was killed by Tarik, mawla of Musa, son of Nusayr when he conquered al-Andalus and took possession of the capital Toledo. (al-Mas'udi, pp. 359-60)

The presence of the name Roderic in Qusayr 'Amra might suggest that, in the case of the ruler of Spain, as in the case of all other rulers, the figure of Roderic, beside referring to the historical figure, became the personification of rulership on Spain. Such a reading of the name Roderic would offer a much more consistent picture of the panel, as all other names do not point to specific figures and there is no trace of inscriptions describing the panel as a portray of a real, historic event involving real and historic figures. This would reinforce the reading of the panel as the motif of the kings of the world, symbolically gathered in Qusayr 'Amra to welcoming the new dynasty as a new member (Grabar 1954). Legends helped in clarifying an iconographical theme not common in bathhouses, a motif which is part, together with other inscriptions, of the additions to the usual repertoire of images of thermal complexes.

All scholars agree that the theme of the gathering of kings is undoubtedly of Iranian origins, a possible model being the narrative about the meeting of earthly kings in Kirmanshah in Sasanian Iran. An echo of this or of other ancient models would have been the mid-seventh-century cycle of paintings in Afrasiyab depicting ambassadors from several Asiatic peoples (Fowden 2004a, pp. 216-18). There is further evidence for making the case that such an idea penetrated the Arabian Peninsula during late antiquity.

7 I thank Irfan Shahid for having pointed this to me.

In one inscription located on the dam of Marib in Yemen, Abraha, ruler of the South of the Arabian Peninsula, nominally on behalf of the Negus of Ethiopia, celebrates the reconstruction of the damaged dam itself, the end of a plague and, overall, the submission of large part of the Arabs in the South of the Peninsula. The importance of the event transpires from the diplomats invited to attend the celebration: ambassadors of the Negus, Byzantium, Persia, Ghassanids, Lakhmids and the phylarch of Palestine all attended the ceremonies carried out in Marib in the year 548 (CIH 541;[8] Smith 1954, pp. 437-41).

In the bathhouse of Qusayr ʻAmra an ideal gathering takes place attended by the rulerships attested by the titles of the various rulers. The gathering has a universal horizon, from Spain to Iran and perhaps farther East China and India, all areas touched by Arab-Muslims during the process of conquest and all territories that experienced rooted system of sovereignty now symbolically acquiescing Islam.

Inscriptions served therefore in order to introduce specific and innovative or unusual themes within a cycle that for most sections was in accord with the traditional way of decorating bathhouses. Apart from the recently deciphered inscription mentioning al-Walid ibn Yazid (709-744), before he accessed to the caliphate (al-Walid II, 743-44) and portrayed as in search for religious virtue and piety, another inscription emerged from the restoration of the paintings indicating Jonah as the protagonist of a mini-cycle developed in the alcove and in the northern wall of the prayer hall. The scene, already identified by Fontana (2012) before the restoration, was confirmed by the emergence of the typical scene of Jonah resting under the vine plant and of a Greek inscription identifying the figure as Jonah.

4 Conclusion

From a stylistic point of view as well as with regard to the format of the cycle, Qusayr ʻAmra and its paintings belong to the late antique period. In this sense, despite its pejorative terms, what said by Wickoff at the time of its discovery looks correct: with regard to several subjects Qusayr ʻAmra is but a late example of stylistic and iconographic ideas developed earlier. The modalities in which the decoration is carried out and the formal qualities of the subjects selected for the decorative program of Qusayr ʻAmra belonged to late antiquity, as the team of artisans in charge of the work was working within a late antique tradition and the aesthetic taste of the patron and users of the complex largely drawn upon late antique models. What Wickoff

8 http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/index.php?id=79&prjId=1&corId=7&colId=0&recId=2382#collidp321919536 (2016-02-08).

was unaware of it was the effort by al-Walid ibn Yazid, the patron of Qusayr ʻAmra, to customize the complex in order to express a specific agenda. The latter includes the depiction of classical personifications, the presence of an Arabic inscription with Islamic religious tones, the depiction of the life of Jonah and the panel with the six kings paying homage to the enthroned figure on the back wall of the basilica. Technically the insertion of such unusual themes was facilitated by the addition of legends, sometimes both in Greek and Arabic and sometimes in Arabic only. Such an understanding of the actual procedure in conceptualizing and creating the cycle of painting in Qusayr ʻAmra, helps at overturning the picture of Qusayr ʻAmra – as a place in which the vices of Umayyads narrated by the Abbasids were made real, as well as the picture of its patron, al-Walid ibn Yazid, as a young playboy only devoted to drink, poetry and women (cf. Judd 2008). While a proper publication of current restorations will offer further details on the relationship between iconography and the patron of Qusayr ʻAmra, keep looking at late antique examples might help at giving the proper context to the structure, decoration and users of early eighth century Qusayr ʻAmra.

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