

TWO Umayyad MOSAIC FLOORS FROM QASTAL

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In early February, 2000 a report reached the Dept. of Antiquities of Jordan about the discovery of patches of mosaic pavements at Qastal following earth moving operations. A guard was appointed and the site kept protected until the beginning of June when salvage excavations were carried out¹.

Al-Qastal, well-known for its Umayyad qasr and adjacent mosque², is situated 24 km to the southeast of Amman next to the highway which leads to Queen 'Alia International Airport. The excavated structure lies at a distance of some 400 m to northwest of the qasr and 20 m to the west of the western reservoir from which it is separated by a paved street.

The Excavations

The structure was excavated through a grid of seven squares measuring 4 × 4 m and 5 × 5 m. The mixed debris in the excavated squares, especially in squares 6 and 7, were surprisingly productive in providing ceramic material, fragments of carved stucco and fresco paintings as well as large amounts of variously shaped marble fragments, plain buff and coloured tesserae including glass. Also the existence of wall mosaics was made certain not only from the recovery of large amounts of tiny tesserae but also from the retrieval of plaster window frames with tiny cubes still adhering to them. Considering the state of preservation of the building whose walls had been robbed out to foundation level-with the exception of short lengths of walls delimiting the southern room and which are preserved to a height of one to two courses - and the mixed nature of the finds, it is only natural that we know neither the full

1. This article is a short version of a detailed report written in Arabic and submitted to the Registration Centre of the Dept. of Antiquities of Jordan.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr. Fawwaz al-Khrayshah, director-general of the DOA, for entrusting me with the supervision of these excavations. I am also grateful to Drs. Erin Addison and Stephania Dodoni for logistical help, to Ms. Safinaz Kubajah and Mr. Ali al-Da'jah for drawing the plans, to Raghda Zawaydeh for consolidating the mosaic floors, and to Shaykh Shibli al-Fayez for support and hospitality. Photographic documentation by the author and M. Piccirillo.

2. The bibliography is extensive and can be conveniently found in Addison, 2000: 477-90.

extent nor the exact manner in which the walls were covered. It is likely, however, that the carved stucco and the glass mosaic were used sparingly to emphasize specific areas, e.g. window frames and niches.

The core unit of the partially exposed building (Fig 1; Photos 1-2) is a large room (A) 8.80 m long from north to south but whose east-west length remains unknown because its eastern extension lies underneath the paved street. The northwestern corner is occupied by a circle 1.55 m in diameter outlined by a shallow channel 0.36 m wide and enclosed within a square 3.00 m to the side (Photos 3, 5). In the southeastern corner of the square stands a marble pedestal ($0.39 \times 0.37 \times 0.26$ m) topped by a base 0.35 m in diameter. A similar pedestal must have stood at the southwestern corner as indicated by the impressions left on the mortar bedding; a narrow groove cut into the floor and extending between the corner pedestals suggest that the square area was marked off by some kind of balustrade. The impressions left on the mortar bedding indicate that the circle was paved with square marble tiles whereas long rectangular slabs were used to pave the bands defining the square. The area immediately to the east of the enclosed circle was paved with hexagonal and small indented square slabs. The rest of the floor of the large room was paved with tilted elongated hexagons and small squares laid in such a way as to form quatrifoils. The function of the marked off square remains uncertain and definitely has nothing to do with water or a fountain pool. If the large room was an audience-hall, used among other functions for entertainment, it may be assumed that this restricted corner was the place where the singer, dancer or musician stood when performing his/her act.

Entrance to the large room was through a door opened on the northern side. Only the western door-jamb (a monolith 1.20 m high) and a door-sill 1.35 m wide were exposed. The door-sill which has three sockets and a curving groove for a sliding door might extend another 0.85 m to the east if the door was centrally placed in the northern wall. Preceding the large room (A) is an ante-chamber or a vestibule (3) whose walls have been completely robbed out. The exposed surface which was paved with mosaics measures 4.60 m from north to south and 3.82 m from east to west, but if we add the width of the surround of the tessellated floor (0.28 m) we arrive at the figure 4.10 as the width of the vestibule. The mosaic floor is largely destroyed but the preserved portions show a border of stepped crenellation enclosing a field decorated with intersecting double diagonal rows which form indented squares filled with lozenges (Photo 4).

Opening in the middle of the western side of the large room (A) is an apsed alcove (B), a step higher, measuring 6.10 by 2.30 m. Two small doors,

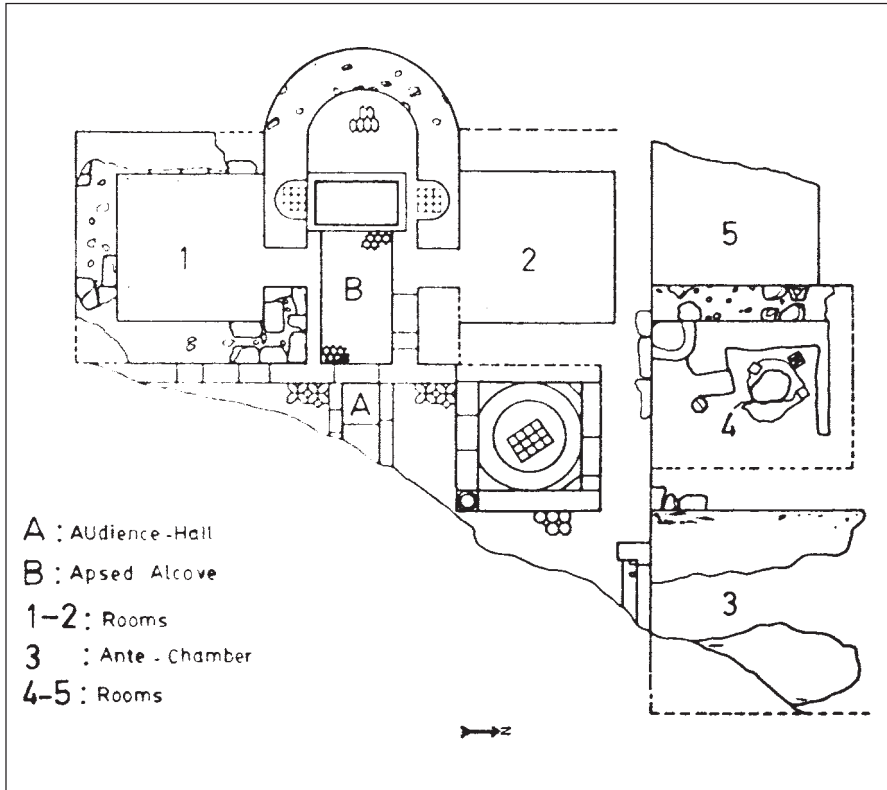


Fig. 1 General plan of the excavations.

to right and left, each 0.85 m wide, open into the flanking rooms (1 and 2). A little further to the west of each door is a semi-circular niche 0.83 m deep and 0.65 m wide, perhaps intended to receive statues. From the opus-sectile remaining in situ and the mortar impressions (Photo 1), the pavement of the apsed alcove can be divided into three sections: a band extending across the two niches paved with a single long rectangular slab of marble; the apsed section to the west paved with elongated hexagons, and the rectangular part to the east paved with dark brown or black and white marble tiles forming six-pointed stars. These central pavements were bounded on the north and south sides by a border 0.50 and 0.30 m wide respectively. The niches show a pavement of square tiles. Along the edges of the robbed out side walls there still remain short lengths of thick plaster layer faced with marble veneer. The thresholds opening onto the southern and northern rooms (1 and 2) were paved with mosaics similar to that in the vestibule,

i.e. indented squares formed by intersecting double diagonal rows filled with lozenges and stepped crenellations placed in the middle of the base of the lateral triangular compartments. On the north and south sides of the rug-like threshold mosaic is a border which consists of a simple fillet with rectangular merlons and a central upright forming alternately inverted T-shapes.

The Mosaic Floors in the Northern and Southern Rooms

Considering the extensive damage of the building whose walls had been razed down to the foundation levels, it is miraculous that substantial portions of the mosaic floors to the north and south of the apsed alcove were well preserved. The northern room (2) is a square measuring 3.30 m to the side. Its mosaic floor (Color Plates III) is framed by a border of three-stand guilloche which is flanked by lines of alternately inverted T-shapes with colours counterpoised. The field is decorated with interlaced scuta with concave ends outlined in simple double-strand guilloche leaving an octagonal compartment in the centre which is the focal point of the floor, quarter-circles at the corners and triangular spaces along the middle of each side. The central octagonal compartment depicts a fierce lion who had just pounced on the back of a bulky bull trying to bring him down (Photo 1 and Color Plates I, III).

The scene is rendered so realistically that we can observe the intense concentration of the lion and his forepaws piercing the neck of the bull who seems to be collapsing under the weight of the lion. The gradation of colour tones and shading not only bring out anatomical details such as legs, muscles and ribs, but also give the animals life and depth. In contrast to the formal treatment of heraldic animals which can be seen in many Byzantine church mosaic pavements in Jordan (Piccirillo, 1993; Nos. 122; 139; 213; 266), the scene here shows the lion in vivid attack. The corner quarter-circles show birds and leafy plants drawn against white backgrounds. The northeastern panel shows a duck with the head turned backward and the panel in the southeastern corner depicts a partridge pecking a leafy plant (Photo 1 and Color Plates IV, VIII). Other two partially preserved birds, possibly a duck and a partridge, occupy the remaining corners. The triangular spaces along the middle of each side show polychrome triangles of superimposed chevrons which have rainbow effect. The design of the southern room (1) is identical to that of room 2 except that here the central octagon is taken up by a leopard devouring a gazelle

(Photo 1 and Color Plates V, VII). The scene rendered so realistically reveals a taste for the extremes of ferocity and pathos. The accented eye, the bare fangs and the spiked teeth which pierce the twisted neck of the gazelle and makes it bleed profusely all combine to emphasize the ferocity of the leopard and the agony of the suffering gazelle (Photo 1 and Color Plates VII). Images like these (a lion attacking a bull and a leopard tearing a gazelle) were bound to conjure up certain associations of power and defeat of adversaries. Although the overall design of these two mosaic floors is simple and finds parallels in several mosaic floors from the region of Madaba (Piccirillo, 1996; Nos. 109; 124), their execution is far more superior to comparable floors and show considerable technical skill. The vitality of the animal scenes and the subtle gradation of colour tones were mainly due to the large palette and the tiny size of the tesserae which included numerous glass cubes. These tesserae were graded in size and diminished at the heads and necks; their average density ranged between 145-90-48 tesserae per 10 cm².

To the east of the vestibule (3) are two rooms (4, 5) divided by a crude wall built of irregularly shaped stone with chinks set in mortar. Only a single row of this wall remains; the other walls delimiting these two rooms have disappeared without a trace and the main evidence for their existence is a thick floor (0.20 m thick) of pure lime. The exposed surface of room 4 measures 3.90 m by 3.00 m. Two depressions with plastered interior,

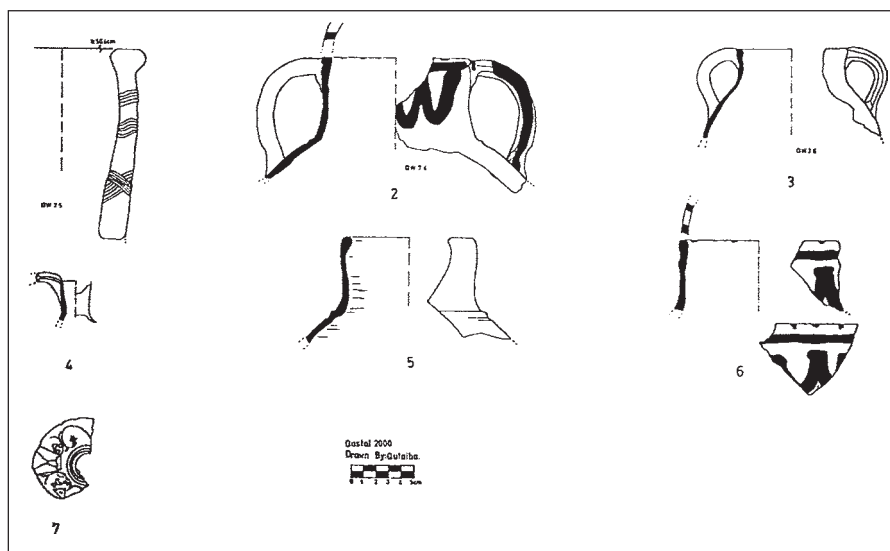


Fig. 2 Pottery from the excavations.

ca. 0.80 m across and 0.45 m deep, were sunk into the floor surface; the upper part (rim) of one of these depressions was built with dried mud coated with white wash, and three brick tiles incised with double curving lines were placed around the rim (Photo 6). Set into these depressions were creamy buff, thick walled basing with combed surface decoration; thick lime encrustation covered the interior surfaces. These basins, dated to the second half of the eight-century, were apparently used for the preparation of lime mortar, as indicated by the presence of lumps of pure lime plaster in the vicinity. This means not only that rooms 4 and 5 were later additions, but also that the original function of the building had changed. It is even likely that those engaged in the preparation of lime mortar were responsible for robbing out the building stones and marble pavements of the original structure. Although the pottery does not derive from stratified contexts, with the exception of the thick-walled, comb decorated basins, they constitute a relatively homogeneous assemblage which can be dated to ca. 720-800 A.D. These pottery assemblages (Fig. 2; Photo 9) include the ubiquitous red-painted ware, the thick walled basins with bands of comb decoration, the fine buff (Mafjar) ware and a channel-nozzle lamp with scroll and floral motifs. The carved stucco fragments (Photos 10-11) also support a date not before 720 A.D. for the original construction of the building.

Context and Ownership

The lay out of the partially exposed structure is strongly reminiscent of the plan of the audience-hall at Qusayr Amra and Hammam al-Sarāh. It is likely therefore that the large room (A) and the apsed alcove (B) was an audience-hall, a place for entertainment where poets, singers and musicians could be received; it is also likely that this audience-hall was part of a bath complex as at Amra and Sarāh. We may also assume that the excavated building belonged to the patron of the qasr and adjacent mosque, and was closely connected with them just as Hammam al-Sarāh was connected with Qasr al-Hallabāt (Bisheh, 1982:143). In fact the similarity between Qastal and Hallabat is striking; both have a qasr with elaborate decorations in mosaic, carved stucco, fresco paintings and marble veneers, extra-mural mosque, hydraulic installations and farther removed bath. But who is the patron or owner of the qasr at Qastal? Poetry of the Umayyad period associate both Muwaqqar and Qastal with Yazid bin Abd al-Malik (720-24) and his son al-Walid (743-44). A verse in a panegyric addressed to Yazid, the poet Kuthayyir 'Azza mentions Muwaqqar and Qastal in a context which

indicate that both belonged to the same patron: “May God bless the quarter (family) whose abode is in Muwaqqar (and extends) to Qastal al-Balqa of the elevated chambers (Mahārib)”³.

In another poem composed by the same poet in praise of Yazid, mention is made of the two Qastals (bi-l Qastalayn): “May God reward a quarter in Muwqqar with pleasant life, / and May the thunder clouds let fall copious rains / With the abounding clouds and pouring showers / He was bestowed in the two Qastals with abundant boon”. (Kuthayyir ‘Azza, 1971:340-41;349). The two Qastals here clearly refer to Qastal and Muwaqqar just as al-‘Irāqayn is used to refer to Kufa and Basrah or al-Qaryatayn for Mecca and Medina. Among other poets who paid a visit to the court of al-Walid b. Yazid at Qastal was Sa‘id b. Murra al-Kindi: “They deliberately move to a spot where his dwellings, are / not surpassed in generosity nor even come close to his / when the fires of the two quarters in Qastal appeared to them, / They chose among all the dwellings your fire to halt” (Atwan; 1981; 387; note 3). Al-Azdi reports that upon the death of Hisham and the succession of al-Walid to the caliphate in 743, Khalid bin Abd-Allah al-Qasri travelled from Damascus to the residence of al-Walid at Qastal (al-Azdi, 1967:52). All these quoted verses and references support the identification of the two Umayyad palatial buildings at Muwaqqar and Qastal as the residences of Yazid bin Abd al-Malik and his son al-Walid. Additional references in the “Vita di Santo Stefano Sabaita” indicate that in the eighth-century a monastery and caves inhabited by monks existed at Qastal (Pirone, 1991: 53; 97; 229;303;347)⁴.

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3. Mahārib/Mahārib (Sing.Mihrāb) means a throne-room, the most honourable sitting place, the highest chamber in a house. Such a meaning as an elevated chamber is supported by a verse attributed to Waddāh al-Yaman: “A mistress of a mihrāb when I come to her I do not meet her until I ascend a flight of steps”.

4. I am grateful to Dr. Pierre Bikai, director of ACOR, for directing my attention to this source.

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