

Late-antique art in Syria and its Umayyad evolutions

Garth Fowden

Introduction

Except when recalling the story of Abraham's assault on the idols in his native city — in other words, the dawn of monotheism — the *Qur'ān* wastes little space on arguments about images.¹ This indifference to contemporary idolatry it shares with the gospels, but not at all with the Jewish scriptures or Christian patristic literature. For ancient Israelites as for early Christian bishops, idolatry was an omnipresent pollution. For Jesus in the bosom of Jewish Palestine, and apparently also for Muḥammad in the early 7th-c. Ḥijāz, it was not.

Yet images both polytheist and Christian were hard to avoid in the Roman provinces Muḥammad's followers conquered, above all in populous and wealthy Syria.² Even the wide spectrum of figural depiction Syrian archaeology continues to reveal today can barely hint at the Aladdin's Cave that greeted the Muslim invaders.³ The mosaics of Jordan provide an especially compact and abundant corpus of evidence concentrated between the 5th and 8th c.: they document a revival of classical forms in the age of Justinian, with figural compositions reflecting living knowledge of Greek mythology and poetry, accompanied by an impressive elaboration of geometrical motifs.⁴ Much of this rich visual vocabulary was still in use in the 630s, and survived to adorn the great period of Umayyad building that began in the reign of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705).

As was natural, the invaders' reactions were not a unison. Some liked what they saw. One anecdote (that rings true because it belies the austerity often imputed to him) has 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb acquiring in Syria a silver censer decorated with images, and presenting it to the Prophet's mosque in al-Madīna.⁵ Another story concerns Aws b. Tha'laba al-Taymī, a noted leader

Frequently cited abbreviations:

Album-Goodwin	S. Album and T. Goodwin, <i>Sylloge of Islamic coins in the Ashmolean</i> 1 (Oxford 2002)
Donceel-Voûte	P. Donceel-Voûte, <i>Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban</i> (Louvain 1988)
E.I.	H. A. R. Gibb et al. (edd.), <i>The encyclopaedia of Islam</i> (2nd edn., Leiden 1960-)
H.C.	J.-M. Mayeur et al. (edd.), <i>Histoire du Christianisme des origines à nos jours</i> , t.4 (Paris 1993)
K.I.	J. Sourdel-Thomine and B. Spuler, <i>Die Kunst des Islam</i> (Berlin 1973)
Piccirillo	M. Piccirillo, <i>The mosaics of Jordan</i> (Amman 1993)
Q.'A.	M. Almagro et al., <i>Qusayr 'Amra: residencia y baños omeyyas en el desierto de Jordania</i> (2nd edn., Granada 2002)
Q.H.G.	D. Schlumberger, <i>Qasr el-Heir el-Gharbi</i> (Paris 1986)
Schick	R. Schick, <i>The Christian communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic rule</i> (Princeton 1995).

1 G. R. Hawting, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam: from polemic to history* (Cambridge 1999) 55-66; G. Monnot, "Wathaniyya," *E.I.* 11.176b.

2 By 'Syria' are intended the regions currently called Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan.

3 Schick, *Christian communities*, pays careful attention to which floor mosaics in churches were or were not still visible under the Umayyads. His assertion (204-5) that mosaics in secular buildings were not disfigured is invalidated by the newly-discovered Dionysiac mosaic from a house in Jarash that was still in use in the Umayyad period: I. Z'ubi, P.-L. Gatier, M. Piccirillo and J. Seigne, "Note sur une mosaïque à scène bachique dans un palais d'époque Byzantine à Jérash," *LibAnn* 44 (1994) 539-46. See also V. Egan and P. Bikai in *AJA* 103 (1999) 502-5, including figs 14-16 (Nabatean cultic reliefs still visible into the Umayyad period at Khirbat al-Dharīḥ southeast of the Dead Sea). Muslim tradition placed Syria among the chief sources of the pre-Islamic Arabian idolatry that had gradually adulterated Abrahamism: Hishām b. al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-aṣṅām* 5 (Atallah).

4 Piccirillo 15, 23, 25-26.

5 Ibn Rusta, *Kitāb al-a'lāq al-naḥḥa* 66 (de Goeje).