

ISLAMIC ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY  
IN THE PUBLICATIONS OF  
MARGUERITE GAUTIER-VAN BERCHEM

*In Memoriam*

by  
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Marguerite Gautier-van Berchem (1892-1984)  
(Photo Foundation van Berchem).

Marguerite Gautier-van Berchem was born in Geneva in 1892, the daughter of Max van Berchem and Elisabeth de Saugy. Her father, a celebrated Orientalist, was trained in Arabic and Islamic civilisation by the German scholars Fleischer and Krehl in Leipzig and Nöldeke in Strassbourg. When he met in Paris with Clermont-Ganneau and Sachau, they convinced him to gain a direct contact with the antiquities of the Near East. He visited Jerusalem for the first time in 1888. This contact with the Holy City made a profound impression upon him. From 1893 to 1895, he travelled between Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon and published two

volumes on the churches and Crusader castles of Syria<sup>1</sup>. He discovered, during his journeys, that the Arabic inscriptions were the key to Islamic archaeology and history and laid down in 1892 the basis of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum*. He worked in Jerusalem between 1888 and 1914 and accumulated photographs of monuments and impressions of inscriptions. The two volumes of the inscriptions of Jerusalem *Ville et Haram* appeared between 1922 and 1927, after his death.

His daughter Marguerite lived at the familial Château de Crans, on the shore of Lake Lemman, where Max van Berchem hosted the famous scholars of his time. She

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<sup>1</sup> Max van Berchem et Edmond Fabio, *Voyage en Syrie*, Le Caire, 1913-15. 2 vols.

received an excellent education in modern languages, music and archaeology and was attracted to the East. Unfortunately, other duties fell to her: in 1914, World War I broke out and she volunteered, with thirty other Swiss personalities such as the writer Jacques Chenevière and the Historian Etienne Clouzot, to join the International Committee of the Red Cross. She worked for four years at the head of the service for the German speaking prisoners. After the War, she was able to join the Ecole du Louvre in Paris and went later to Rome where she studied mosaics. She stayed fourteen years in Italy, and, when the German troops invaded Belgium in 1939, she was advised by the Swiss Embassy to leave the country. She returned to Geneva and joined the Red Cross again, where she created a special service to help the Arabic speaking prisoners. Throughout her life, she was an active member of this humanitarian organisation. In 1934, she participated in the XVth Conference in Tokyo; she accomplished short missions in Nepal (1957), Syria and in Jordan (1964) where she had the privilege to be received by King Hussein. The Red Cross invited her to Morocco and Algeria in 1950. While there, she rediscovered the ruins of Sedrata with the help of the French Air Force (see below).

### Christian Mosaic

The devotion of Marguerite van Berchem to the Red Cross did not prevent her from following her interest in archaeology. In 1924, with Etienne Clouzot, she published a volume on Christian mosaics from the fourth to the tenth century.<sup>2</sup> It was the first comprehensive study of mosaic techniques including the evolution of the art and the description of different themes. More than 300 photographs and drawings illustrated the volume. This work, still very useful, was an excellent preparation for

the study of the Umayyad mosaics in Jerusalem and Damascus.

### The Dome of the Rock and Damascus (Pls. XLVI, XLVII).

Before his death in 1921, Max van Berchem expressed the wish that the Mosaics of the Dome of the Rock "be the subject of a complete and careful study".<sup>3</sup> This wish was fulfilled in 1927-28, when K.A.C. Creswell invited Marguerite van Berchem to undertake this study. She arrived by boat first in Alexandria and then Jaffa. She reached the Holy City and lived at the Prussian Hospice. Father H. Vincent of the Ecole Biblique supported her mission. Although it was not easy at that time for a woman to work in the Muslim sanctuary, she was granted permission to take pictures and examine the mosaics, wearing special trousers, as she said and "perched on the tie-beam of the octogonal colonnade, or at the top of a ten metre high ladder".<sup>4</sup> She had to face, from time to time, the rivalries of the two influential families of Jerusalem but she was able to accomplish the work and publish a detailed and relevant analysis of the mosaics in 1932.<sup>5</sup> She was the first scholar to demonstrate, convincingly, the local origin of the mosaic decoration: it "shows that at the time of the Arab conquest a very refined and dynamic school of art existed in Syria. This school had its own character which had developed and evolved independently of Byzantium."<sup>6</sup> Through her experience in the study of western mosaics, she was able to recognise the originality of the Syro-Palestinian craftsmen: a Hellenistic tradition, represented by the use of acanthus leaves, of the vine scrolls and garlands meets with a Sassanid-Oriental decoration, illustrated by "stylised flowers in the form of lotuses or tulips",<sup>7</sup> and the use of rich jewels (Pl. XLVII). The use of mother-of-pearl against the light, is another characteristic of the oriental technique.

<sup>2</sup> *Mosaiques chrétiennes du IVème au Xème siècle*; dessins de Marcelle van Berchem, Genève, 1924.

<sup>3</sup> M. Gautier-van Berchem, S. Ory, *Muslim Jerusalem*, Genève, 1982, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> K.A.C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, Oxford, 1932; re-edited 1969.

<sup>6</sup> *Muslim Jerusalem*, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

The mosaics of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus (Pl. XLVIII), built by Walid I (705-715) are of a different style: here a panoramic scene of palaces, pavilions, villages together with an amphitheatre develop along a river in between huge trees. The architectural motifs are influenced by Hellenistic decoration, as it appears in the Pompeiian frescoes, and represent, as related by some Arab geographers, the cities admired by the Umayyads. Despite the tradition related by some of these authors,<sup>8</sup> that the workers were sent by the emperor of Byzantium, at the request of the Caliph, Marguerite van Berchem was inclined to believe that the artists were Syrian natives. She backed up her thesis by careful study of literary sources: the earliest testimony is by the historiographer al-Buladhuri (9th century) who records that al-Walid I had sent 80 craftsmen of Rūm (Christian-Greek orthodox or converted to Islam) and Copts from Syria and Egypt to embellish with mosaics and marble the Mosque of Medine. Muqaddisi (around 985) states that the mosque of Mekka built by al-Mahdi was decorated by Syrians and Egyptians artists.<sup>9</sup> But some authors reject the hypothesis of Arab craftsmen and argue that Syria and Palestine ceased to build prestigious monuments after the Muslim Conquest, for almost a century.<sup>10</sup> However, this argument is not valid, since Christian churches and other monuments continued to be built during the time of Umayyads, as evidenced by discoveries in Syria, Palestine and Jordan<sup>11</sup> and were reported with admiration by the chroniclers.<sup>12</sup>

## Sedrata (Pls. XLIX-L)

This city situated 800 km. South of Algiers and 14 km. of the oasis of Ouargla, became the capital of the 'Ibadite tribes of Berber origin who followed Ibn Rostem. After the destruction of their capital Tahert (modern Tiaret) in western Algeria by the Fātimids in 909, these Kharijite tribes moved to the desert and tapped underground wells. The desolated lands flourished soon and the refugees built a city which prospered in the 10th and 11th centuries, embellished by beautiful houses and palaces within gardens. The first excavations were carried out in 1881 by H. Tarry who discovered a palace decorated with stucco together with the famous well of 'Ain el Safa. P. Blanchet continued the excavations and transported part of the stucco decoration to Paris and Algiers. But the site was reburied by the sands and lost, until it was rediscovered by Marguerite van Berchem<sup>13</sup> in 1950, as mentioned above.

The ruins of the site, traversed by streets and water channels (*segua*) extend over an area more than two kilometres long and not more than 600 metres wide, as proved by aerial photographs, taken in 1951. A hydraulic survey was conducted in January of the same year, but the famous 'Ain el Safa could not be located. A short campaign of excavation followed in February and was stopped because of lack of transportation. A large house, 20.00 by 10.00 metres with a central courtyard was excavated. Many rooms, 7 metres long and only 2 metres wide open on the courtyard, some of them decorated with arches and colonnettes.

<sup>8</sup> Ya'qubi, *Historiae*, ed. de Houtsma, Leyden, 1883, I, p. 340; Tabari, *Annals*, ed. de Goeje, Leyden, 1897-1901, II, p. 1194.

<sup>9</sup> Cited by M. van Berchem, in *Early Muslim Architecture*, 1969, p. 233.

<sup>10</sup> Janine Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie*, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> A Christian monument was built in 687, under 'Abd el-Malik Ibn Marwan, at Rabbah, near Kerak, *ADAJ*, XVI (1971) p. 75. The Church of the Virgin Mary was decorated with mosaics in 662-3, *ADAJ*, XXVI (1982) p. 419. Other churches

of the Umayyad period, decorated with mosaics were excavated at Qweismeh, Jerash and Rihab. (See M. Picirillo in this issue).

<sup>12</sup> El Walid I visited and admired the churches of the Resurrection (Holy Sepulchre), Lydda and Edessa. Al Muqaddasi, *Ahsan al-Taqasim*, ed. de Goeje, Leyden, 1906, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Documents Algériens*, Série Monographie, N°11, Sep. 1953; *La Nouvelle Clio*, III, n°s 9-10, 1951, p. 389-396; *Ars Orientalis*, I (1954) p. 157-171. See also bibliography below.

In the second campaign (November 1951 to January 1952), a residential complex was discovered at the eastern outskirts of the city (Pl. XLIX). It was a fortified villa, enclosed by a wall of large boulders, preserved to the height of 4.00 to 5.00 metres, and fortified by square towers. Outside the enclosure, square water basins, revetted with local gray stucco (*timchent*) were brought to light. At the northern end of the complex, a house with a central courtyard was uncovered. It includes a large hall (8.00 by 2.00 metres) terminated on both sides by two *iwan* with arches. The walls were revetted with stucco panels (Pl. L), finely decorated with geometrical and vegetal designs. Fifty boxes of this revetment were brought to the Algiers Museum.

According to Marguerite van Berchem, the houses of Sedrata are but a faint image of the rich villas and palaces of the capital Tahert, as they were described by the chronicler Ibn Şaghir. The architecture and stucco decoration reflect strong North African influence, represented by the mosque of Qairouan. But the excavator had drawn the attention of scholars to the eastern ties as reflected in the Iraqi city of Samarra and the Iranian art centre of Nishapur. These ties could be easily explained by the presence of many *Kharijites* of the Near East who took refuge in the isolated and well protected oasis of Sedrata.

The working conditions were extremely hard because of the arid climate and the frequent sand storms. But with her well known courage and perseverance, M. van Berchem was able to overcome all these difficulties, if the Algerian war had not stopped the excavations.

### The Foundation van Berchem

Max van Berchem donated his archives to the City of Geneva. The valuable documents were first deposited in the Museum of Art and History. They were

later transferred to the '*Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire*' and placed in the basement of this building. They came to light only in 1973 when the daughter of the Orientalist, already at a great age, fought to establish the Foundation van Berchem and obtain a room in the library, bearing the name of the Swiss scholar. Dr. Solange Ory from the University of Aix-en-Provence was commissioned by Professor Janine Sourdel to work on the classification of the archives. About 400 negatives and photographs were arranged and published in an exhaustive catalogue.<sup>14</sup> Files, containing bibliography, information and personal notes of Max van Berchem were established according to the alphabetic order of sites. Dr. Anouar Louca who was at one time in charge of the archives published a booklet about the Swiss scholar and his work, sorted the correspondence and edited with Ch. Genequand the two volumes of the *Opera Minora*.<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by M. Van Berchem, the role of the Foundation is to promote "the studies related to Islamic and Arabic civilisation, in the frame of the Archives Max van Berchem."<sup>15</sup> The Arab Organisation for Education, Culture and Sciences became aware of the importance of the documents left by the Swiss Orientalist and sent an observer to Geneva to examine and report on it. Saudi Arabia generously donated 10.000 \$ to help publish documents and the correspondance of Max van Berchem with Louis Massignon<sup>16</sup> appeared in 1980, thanks to this support.

### Muslim Jerusalem

I was able, with the help of the Department of Antiquities to fly to Geneva in August 1980 and was kindly invited by Marguerite and her husband Bernard Gautier to their residence on the Plateau of Frontenex (Fig. 2), overlooking Lake Lemman. Both of them were most cordial and hospitable. Marguerite introduced me to the private library and archives of her

<sup>14</sup> S. Ory, *Catalogue de la Phototèque*, Beyrouth, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Geneva, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> See "*Correspondance entre Max van Berchem et Louis Massignon, 1907-1919*" publié par W. Vycichl, Leiden, 1980.



Fig. 2: The Mansion of van Berchem at Frontenex, Geneva.

father. Seated in the garden, planted with cedar and other memorable old trees, I had the chance to converse for long hours with the venerable lady (she was 91) and obtain first hand information about the work of Max van Berchem and her own career. When she came to talk about Jerusalem and the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, she became passionate and eager to convince me of her thesis about the Syro-Palestinian artists who created the immortal chef d'oeuvres. As she wanted me to feel what she was explaining, she presented me with her "*La Jérusalem Musulmane, dans l'Oeuvre de Max van Berchem*".<sup>17</sup> and complained that this book in its French version was not accessible to the Arabic speaking countries who were concerned with the fate of the Holy City. H.E. Mr. Ghaleb Barakat, our ambassador in Geneva, was in contact with the Foundation and fully aware of its contribution to the support of Arabic and Islamic Civilisation, especially in the City of Jerusalem. It is thanks to the generosity of H.R.H. Crown

Prince Hassan of Jordan that *Muslim Jerusalem* appeared in 1982. The book of 114 pages contains fifteen chapters and paragraphs, dealing with the history and archaeology of Arab Jerusalem.

Chapter I by Roger du Pasquier considers "Jerusalem and the mystical sensibility of Islam". By his night journey from Mecca to the Holy Sanctuary and his ascension to Heaven (*mi'raj*) from the Rock, the Prophet Muhammed made of Jerusalem the third Holy City of Islam. The *Qibla*, at the beginning of Muhammed's mission, was towards Jerusalem until a revelation commanded the Muslims to face the Ka'ba. The sanctity of the City was also in relation to Abraham who was neither a Muslim nor a Christian but a *hanif* (upright). The place where he intended to sacrifice his son is Mt. Moriah, near Jerusalem. Since the Koran does not specify the son's name, Muslim theologians believed he was Isaac or Ismaël. But there is no consensus on Jerusalem being the only place of sacrifice, as suggested by Dr.

<sup>17</sup> Lausanne, 1978.

du Pasquier: according to Mujîr l-Dîn el Hanbali<sup>18</sup> for example, those who think the son was Isaac, hold that the episode took place in Syria, at two miles from Jerusalem, on the holy Rock; those who regard that the son was Ismaël, place the sacrifice in Mecca. At any rate, Muslim tradition is that at the end of time, “the Ka’ba itself will leave Mecca and hurry to the Rock at Jerusalem (p.7)”

Jerusalem is also linked with the memory of Mary and her son Jesus, who is deemed by the Muslims as a Prophet. The *Mihrab* of Mary’ is placed in the Haram area, probably where the oratory of Zachariah stands today (p. 13). The other sanctuary which the Muslims take into veneration, is the Holy Sepulchre, where the Caliph ‘Omar, according to the tradition, refused to pray. Except for the Fâtimid Caliph el-Hâkim, the Muslim rule of the Holy City demonstrated tolerance and respect for other religions.

Chapter II “Max van Berchem’s visit to Jerusalem” by his daughter begins with a letter from the scholar to his mother, describing his emotion and enthusiasm when he first visited Jerusalem in 1888: “I have seen more beautiful things but nothing so captivating” (p. 18). He returned to the city in 1914 to continue his study of inscriptions but he was full of bitterness because the 1914 war undid all of his work by separating the friends he assembled to work with him on the *Corpus*. Marguerite still remembered the argument he had with his dear friend Herzfeld, after which they had no contact. He was not to return to Jerusalem for he died in 1921, exhausted by his continuous efforts. One of his friends, R.P. Jaussen, wrote that: “he succumbed by the walls of the Holy City”.<sup>19</sup>

In the “Historical notes” (chap. III), S. Ory retraces the history of Bayt el-Maqdis from the Arab Conquest in 638 to the Ottoman period. The Caliph Omar himself supervised the clearance and cleaning of the sacred Rock from the debris left

by the Byzantines and had a rudimentary sanctuary built in the area of the Haram. The role of the Arab Sheikh, Khaled Ibn Thabet el Fahmi, who negotiated the capitulation of Jerusalem is not mentioned by the author.<sup>20</sup> It demonstrates, as I think, that the natives who were tired of Byzantine rule, participated in the surrender of the city to the Arab authority. It is surprising that S. Ory gives credit to the tradition which relates that the Caliph ‘Abd el Malik “forbade the Syrians to go to Mekka” for the pilgrimage (*hajj*). As proved by O. Grabar,<sup>21</sup> this hypothesis has no historical basis, since the Syrian troops who besieged the Ka’ba asked the permission to perform the *hajj* and some Umayyad Caliphs accomplished this duty.

The Latin chroniclers paid homage to the chivalry of Salah al-Dîn, who prevented the bloodshed and protected the Christian monuments. In the Mamlûk period the city was embellished with mosques, hospices and madrasas which constitute the splendor of Muslim Jerusalem and were reported and planned by Max van Berchem. Some of these monuments have been endangered by modern excavations along the wall of the Haram; in June 1969, the madrasa Fakhriyah was partly destroyed and Ribat el Kurd, built by Sultan Qalaoun, collapsed in 1971. El Madrasa el Jawhariyah was destroyed in 1974. The records of Max van Berchem become most precious in the tormented history of the Holy City. A recent work by Dr. Kamel el ‘Asali, *Islamic Institutions of Learning in Jerusalem*, Amman, 1981 (in Arabic) made good use of the photographs and plans of the Foundation’s archives.

The short description of the Dome of the Rock by M. Gautier-van Berchem (chap. V) is followed by the chapter on the mosaics of this monument which cover 1,200 m<sup>2</sup>. The splendid photographs are those of Creswell. They illustrate perfectly the thesis of the author, mentioned above.

“The gilded bronzes of the Dome of

<sup>18</sup> *Al uns al-Jalîl bi tarikh al-Quds wal-Khalîl*, Amman-Beyrouth, 1973, p. 39-41.

<sup>19</sup> Max van Berchem, *Hommage rendu à sa mémoire*, Geneva, 1923, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> See Oleg Grabar, *al-Kuds in Encyclopedia of Islam*, col. 323.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, col. 324.

the Rock” (chap. VII) decorate soffits of the building’s main door or the undersides of the tie beams. The motifs and techniques are unique: the delicate vine scrolls remind one of Hellenistic (Nabataean) vegetal carvings of Corinthian capitals.

In the paragraph on al-Aqsa Mosque, the history of this monument which underwent many transformations is summarized: the sanctuary was built by ‘Abd al-Malik, on the spot of the ‘Omar Shrine. It was destroyed by the 747 earthquake and restored by the ‘Abbāsids and Fāṭimids. It suffered during the Crusades and was restored by the Mamlūks in the fifteenth century. Recent restorations were conducted in 1962-68, until it was burned in 1969.

The analysis of carved woods, (Pl. LI) preserved in the Haram Museum (p. 81) reminds M. Gautier-van Berchem of Greco-Roman traditions; they are all of cypress wood and the author thinks that the panels ornamented not the ceiling but the walls of the Mosque, in the lower part,

above the cyma, because of the nail holes and because the motifs are to be viewed in an **upright** direction. A photograph of the Minbar of Nur el-Dîn with a detail of the carved wood, (Pl. LII) shows that the loss of this gift presented to the Mosque in 1169, is a disaster for students of Islamic art.

It can be said without exaggeration that Muslim Jerusalem was honoured, not only in the works of Max van Berchem, but also in the penetrating studies of his daughter Marguerite. She devoted her life for humanity and for the promotion of Islamic civilisation by her own work and by the creation of the Foundation Max van Berchem. She died in Geneva on January 22nd, 1984 and her last wish was, as she told me, “to rest in peace and that the Foundation stands up”. May these lines be but a modest tribute to her memory.

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