

Frescos: From the Decapolis to the Umayyad Palaces

Frescos are found at many Jordanian sites from the Roman period. The art of frescos, among other forms of art, flourished during the first century AD when the Roman Empire spread its control over the Arab East — due to the fact that the Roman state was the superpower as pertaining to its economic and military capabilities, and the spread of the empire over the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa (Bienkowski 1991: 22). It is worth noting that the Roman Empire was the sole heir to the Hellenistic state with its prolific workshops and creative abilities in the sciences and arts in all the countries it controlled (Wheeler 1964: 191). Therefore we notice that all the nations that came under Roman control were mature nations in their culture, industry and sciences and we find that most of the abilities on the Hellenistic arena started working within the Roman framework in a short period of time (Ainalov 1961: 185). Without doubt, arts depict a distinct aspect of human behaviour as it is a sublime method of portraying creative abilities in culture and the sciences in general, and in religious traditions in particular.

The nature of the Roman and Hellenic culture and sciences undoubtedly converge in many aspects despite the variance of the Greek and Latin languages. They represent a common orientation dependent on the European culture. As for the religious framework, mythology has shown that the religious roots prevalent during the Hellenistic period had matured in a clear and fine manner during the Roman period, therefore we may assert that both states had the same religion despite the variance in some names or cultic practices.

The Roman flow into the Arab East continued to represent the spread of culture, sciences, literature and religions under the supervision of the Roman power and its economic and military capabilities. Here we notice the transmission of culture, arts and sciences through traditions, industry and works of art. In spite of the might of the Roman Empire it could not force Latin on the local nations because of the spread of Greek and the entrenched Greek culture among the people of southern Syria and especially the areas of Jordan and Palestine.

One of the most important reasons for this is the proximity of settlements where the inhabitants adopted a common pattern of culture, traditions, industry and sciences — in addition to their dependence on the Greek language which represented the seeds of the Christian religious school, which in turn overthrew the pagan Roman Empire (Weber 1990: 16).

One of the most important indications of the independence of culture, literature and the arts in the area of northern Jordan during Roman domination (especially the first century AD) is the acceptance of the Roman Empire of the civil confederation declared by the inhabitants of the Decapolis. This civil independence was seen on the literally, cultural and economic arenas and was not a military or political independence. For this reason, the Roman Empire did not oppose this confederation and special coins were issued by these cities which kept their trade relations and local culture and traditions (Tell 1982: 30; McKenzie 1990: 114, 115; Vine 1987: 27).

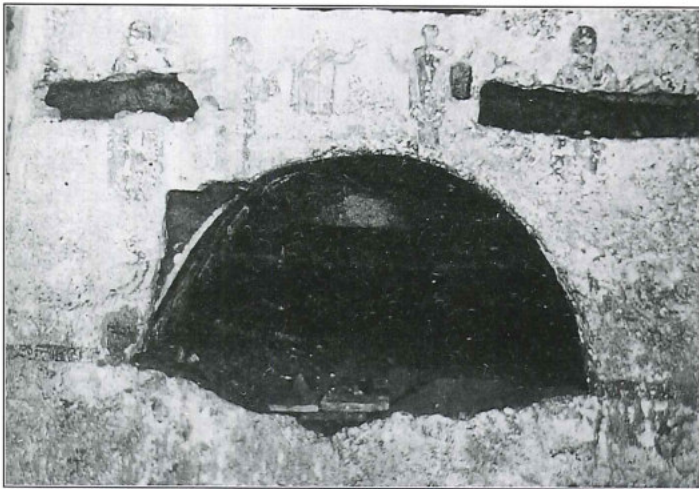
Archaeological excavations at several cities in northern Jordan have discovered important artistic styles which could be studied in order to know the characteristics of the culture and arts prevalent during the Roman period, from 63 BC when the troops of Pompey entered southern Syria until AD 324, the year marking the beginning of the Byzantine era when the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity (Grabar 1963: 15). As the Decapolis represented the most important cultural and civil centres during the Roman period in the Roman Province of Arabia, excavations and archaeological studies were carried out at some of these cities. The cities that joined the confederation are: 1. Gadara - Umm Qays; 2. Abila - Quwayliba; 3. Pella - Ṭabaqat Faḥl; 4. Capitolias - Bayt Rās; 5. Hippos - Fiḡ; 6. Canatha - Qanawāt; 7. Scythopolis - Baysān; 8. Damas - Damascus; 9. Gerasa - Jarash; 10. Philadelphia - 'Ammān; 11. Arbella - Irbid; 12. Dion - Aydūn or al-Ḥuṣn; 13. Bostra - Buṣra; 14. Adraa - Dar'a.

These cities are concentrated in the northern area of Jordan (Mare *et al.* 1982: 39). Some of the most im-

portant examples of frescos at these cities are in the group of tombs excavated and studied by l'Institut Français d'Archéologie du Proche-Orient (IFAPO) at Quwayliba (Abila), where a group of rock-cut caves were used as tombs, particularly during the Roman period (first century AD) (Vibert-Guigue and Barbet 1982: FIG. 6, PL. V-X; Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1994: 317, 318, 320). These tombs represented the common Roman style of cutting the rock with a symmetrical distribution of burials (catacombs) or loculi, in addition to the presence of a stone door for each gate (FIG. 1).

Eighteen caves were discovered on the outskirts of Quwayliba (Abila), most of them decorated with frescos. The interiors of these tombs are decorated with colourful and attractive paintings executed in a superb artistic framework, expressing a highly developed ability in the precise depiction and definition of figures and scenes using true colours and accurate dimensions. These frescos are distributed on the interior walls of the caves in a free style or in an accurate systematic geometrical style. The presence of these frescos inside the caves may have been a common style in the private aristocratic Roman tombs. They reflect a fine practice of creating a magnificent true atmosphere on the interiors of the caves that contained burials of a number of dignitaries. This reflects a fine civilized attitude towards the remains buried in these caves. The themes are varied, some realistic and others imaginary mythological, and this may have been the reality of pagan societies during the first century AD. The most important artistic themes on the facades of these caves are as follows:

1. Representations of people: men, women or children (complete, busts or faces) (FIGS. 2, 3)
2. Representations of mythological figures such as the goddess of victory or wisdom.
3. Representations of symbolic figures (such as the four seasons, sciences and knowledge) (FIG. 4).



1. Catacomb of St. Callixtus, Rome (AD 200-217): Early Christian fresco on the interior walls of the tomb.

4. Representations of animals or birds, such as tigers, lions, hares, peacocks, eagles, ducks, roosters, pigeons, partridges or fish (FIG. 5).
5. The distribution of scenes within regular geometric grids: octagons, hexagons, circles or rectangles with human faces, fish or wild birds in their centres (FIG. 6).
6. The distribution of scenes within regular geometric grids representing branches, flowers and leaves extending either in a wavy pattern or regularly and in symmetry (FIG. 7).
7. Geometric grids representing a series of swastikas surrounded by faces.
8. Free scenes representing a peacock with an extended tail of coloured feathers, walking among flowers and carrying an ear of corn or a flower in its mouth (FIG. 8).
9. The presence of words in Greek on some specific frescos. They represent the names of the artists or the people buried in the cave.
10. The distribution of scenes among architectural elements such as columns with Corinthian or composite capitals, giving the impression of temples or palace facades.
11. The distribution of figures of ladies in oriental dress, the head covered by a veil wrapped around the body (FIG. 9).

Through these artistic elements of the frescos on the cave interiors, we notice that the majority of these elements are present in most of the caves designated as Roman tombs that were discovered at many sites, for example the caves of Capitoliās (Bayt Rās) (FIGS. 10, 11), the cave of Sawm ash-Shunnāq, west of Irbid (FIGS. 12, 13) (Vibert-Guigue 1982: PL. X.3), at Jarash and Marwa, and in the remains of the Decapolis in southern Syria; even as far south as Petra (FIGS. 14, 15).

Frescos survived on the walls of a large number of Roman palaces, houses and tombs in several areas of the Roman Empire. The most important of these example are those of Pompeii in Italy, dated to the first century AD and known by their originality and fine standards (Mancinelli 1981: FIGS. 8, 9, 11, 38, 39, 43-46, 51-56, 60-91). At any rate, we cannot compare the arts of the provinces and colonies with that available at the Roman capital or the great cities near it. I think that the practice of painting on walls in the Roman Empire is a tradition that spread in the Empire and many emperors and generals transferred these arts to the Roman provinces. These arts became a representation of a special aspect of copying fine standards which set root at the important Roman centres.

The minor arts flourished in general in all corners of the Roman Empire, and they became the raw material for the Byzantine arts. However, despite the flourishing of the crafts of these arts they were confined to the service of religious art, therefore we find that most of the works of art, be they frescos, mosaics, carvings on solid materi-



2. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco inside Roman tomb Q.3, C83-5, 8 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



3. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting the portrait of a boy inside Roman tomb Q.10 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).

als, illuminated manuscripts, and even official numismatics were confined to the service of the religious trend. In any case, the elements of the Byzantine art school in Jordan depended on the Oriental style which was derived from the local traditions of the districts of the Holy Land (Hutter 1971: 21). The mosaic map of Mādabā may clearly define the boundaries of these lands which incorporated the districts of Palestine and Jordan, as well as parts of Egypt and Syria (Donner 1992: 16). As such,

the Holy Land was not only a religious and ecclesiastical reference but the traditions and general characteristics of those districts became a material reference forming a vital point in the Byzantine arts. The Byzantine art examples at Mādabā, Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Jarash, Umm Qays, Ṭabaqat Faḥl and other cities in Jordan may represent the first examples of when the Roman Empire turned its back on the inherited pagan nomes and became a Christian state. This converted state put all its material and artistic capabilities into the service of the new religious order, which drove the early Byzantine arts in the Orient to the peak of magnificence. Still, the art of frescos and the similar art of mosaics depended on the origins we saw earlier in the tomb caves of Abila and other places and became foremost among the arts of Italy in the early Byzantine period (Hutter 1971: 21).

At the beginning of the eight century AD, after the declaration of the Umayyad state in Damascus, we notice that the Islamic trend was reserved toward many basic elements of Byzantine arts. The spiritual trends even completely banned figurative representation in religious places, still many Muslims had no objection to decorating their civil arts in their traditional way (Ettinghausen 1962: 11, 29, 190, FIGS. 31, 35, 37).

Thus many old local ideas and styles were employed in the civil Islamic foundations such as palaces and houses. For example, the mosaics of the royal Islamic palaces at Jericho, al-Qaṣṭal and al-Ḥallābāt, and the carvings of the facades at al-Mushatta and at-Ṭūba represent a purely local aspect. As for the famous frescos at Quṣayr 'Amra, they continued the old tradition we saw with the frescos of the tomb caves of Abila, where the elements of the paintings are almost the basic local material for the Islamic arts of the frescos of Quṣayr 'Amra (FIGS. 16-19).

The mere comparison of the table of elements executed in the Quṣayr 'Amra frescos is almost comprehensive. The frescos at Quṣayr 'Amra and Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī in Syria (FIG. 20) were executed by the Umayyad state. The works naturally represent a conglomeration of capacities and capabilities available to the state at the time (Almagro *et al.* 1975: 48). The artistic elements ascertain the similarity and affinity of the Abila and Quṣayr 'Amra frescos as regarding the representations of human figures, birds, animals, flowers, grids and other common elements which ascertain the continuation of the old local style throughout the different periods and ages.

As a result of the different developments of the art of frescos during two thousand years, and despite the great gaps between cultural backgrounds and artistic methods, one can conclude that styles of fresco have reserved a unified oriental character, represented common methods and iconography throughout the Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods.

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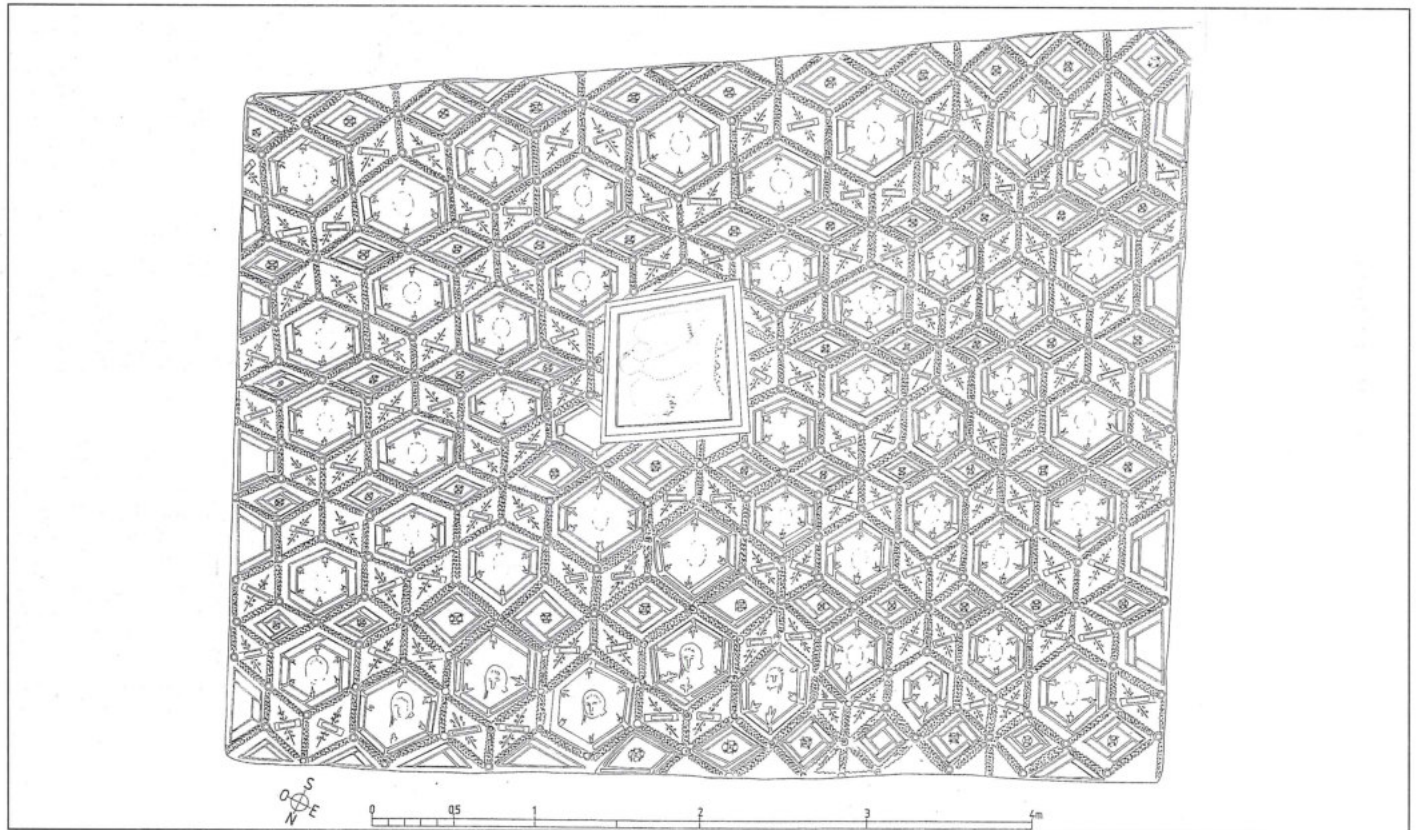
4. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco representing knowledge inside Roman tomb Q.1 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



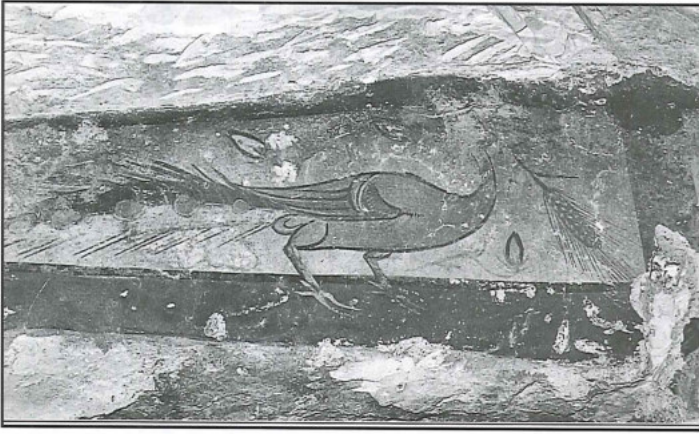
5. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting a peacock and a feline inside Roman tomb Q.7 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



6. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting portraits and fish within a geometrical setting inside Roman tomb Q.2 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



7. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting portraits and flowers within a geometrical setting inside Roman tomb Q.3 (Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1988: PL. 33).



8. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting a peacock inside Roman tomb Q.13 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



9. Abila (Quwayliba): Fresco depicting women in oriental dress inside Roman tomb Q.13 (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



10. Capitoliās (Bayt Rās): Fresco inside a tomb, depicting a warrior (Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1988: PL. 8).



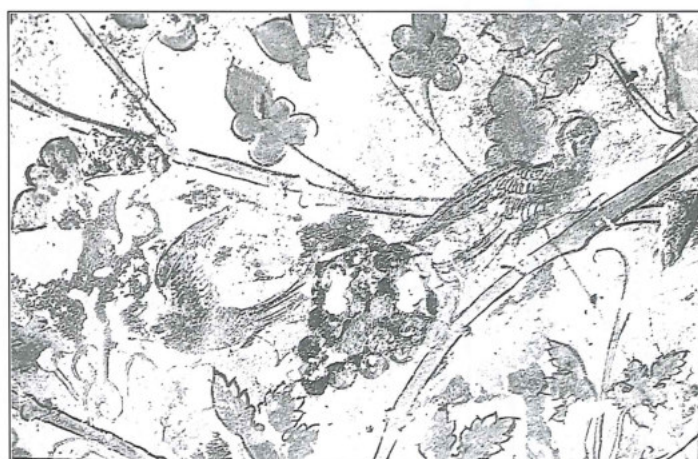
11. Capitoliās (Bayt Rās): Fresco inside a tomb, depicting a mythological scene with the name of Achilles (Barbet and Vibert-Guigue 1988: PL. 8).



12. Sawm ash-Shunnāq: Fresco inside a loculus depicting a winged animal with a woman's face (courtesy of Claude Vibert-Guigue, IFAPO, 'Ammān).



13. Sawm ash-Shunnāq: Fresco inside a tomb depicting a leopard surrounded by floral motifs (courtesy of Claude Vibert-Guigue, IFAPO, 'Ammān).



14. Petra, Siq al-Bārid: Fresco inside a rock-cut triclinium depicting birds among vine leaves (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



15. Petra, Siq al-Bārid: Fresco inside a rock-cut triclinium depicting Pan playing the flute among vine leaves (IFAPO Archives, 'Ammān).



18. Qūṣayr 'Amra: Personifications in fresco.



16. Qūṣayr 'Amra: Fresco depicting working men and animals.



19. Qūṣayr 'Amra: Fresco depicting a lamenting figure and winged cupid.



17. Qūṣayr 'Amra: Fresco depicting animals within a geometric grid.



20. Qaṣr al-Hayr al-Gharbī, Syria: Umayyad fresco depicting Gaea, the Earth goddess.