

CHRISTIAN MONASTERIES AND UMAYYAD RESIDENCES IN LATE ANTIQUE SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

Medieval Arabic writers often mention Christian monasteries, either recalling their former glory, or describing them as places still visited by Muslims. Among recent scholars there is a tendency to dismiss this as the ‘cliché of the monastery’. In an effort to re-evaluate the role of monasteries in both pre-Islamic and Muslim Greater Syria, the present article examines the physical and literary evidence for sites that were occupied by both monasteries and later by Umayyad residences (*quṣūr*) —Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī, Qaṣr Burqu‘, al-Faddayn, Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt and al-Ruṣāfa— underlining the social and political levels at which both monasteries and *quṣūr* operated.

RESUMEN

Los escritores árabes mencionan a menudo monasterios cristianos, aludiendo a su gloria pasada o describiéndolos como lugares que los musulmanes todavía visitan. En la investigación actual hay una tendencia a considerar esto como “el cliché del monasterio”. En un esfuerzo por reconsiderar el papel de los monasterios tanto en la Siria preislámica como musulmana, el presente artículo examina tanto las pruebas materiales como las literarias de los lugares que fueron ocupados tanto por monasterios como por residencias omeyas más tardías (*quṣūr*) —Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī, Qaṣr Burqu‘, al-Faddayn, Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt and al-Ruṣāfa— subrayando tanto los niveles sociales y políticos en los que operaron tanto los monasterios como los *quṣūr*.

Palabras clave: monasterios cristianos sirios, Siria preislámica, Siria omeya, continuidad, *quṣūr*.

Both the medieval Arabic geographical writers and modern toponymy attest the frequent occurrence of the terms ‘dayr’ (monastery) and ‘qaṣr’ (permanent residence) in the placenames of Greater Syria. At one level, the reason for this is not far to seek since monasteries (*diyārāt*) and residences (*quṣūr*) were the most conspicuous architectural features in the landscape, especially in the steppe and desert as it stretches eastward from the densely populated coastal regions toward Mesopotamia. Abandoned, ill-understood structures were labelled by later generations, who were impressed by the size and possibly also the decoration of these complexes, as either ‘dayr’ or ‘qaṣr’ - likely guesses at the function of these buildings in their days of glory. When evaluating these names today we should beware not to over-indulge in toponymic scepticism simply because the terms Dayr and Qaṣr are so common. More lies behind this long tradition of appellation than the general convenience of *beduin*.

Though one might assume that their purpose and function were very different, still Christian ascetic houses and Umayyad country residences in the steppe had various features in common - water, gardens, relative isolation, but combined with accessibility to routes. Under-explored is their shared function as places of convergence in the steppeland. Though our evidence is less concrete than one would wish, it is clear that some *quṣūr* were built at sites formerly occupied by monasteries - or were even constructed in close proximity to an inhabited monastic complex. It is the aim of this article in honor of Tilo Ulbert, who has surveyed and excavated both Christian complexes and Umayyad residences in late antique Syria¹, to examine the archaeological evidence for this relationship in the light of related literary material, in order to understand better the various levels at which these two categories of building are related.

The pursuit of detachment from the world, and at the same time a spiritual paradise made possible through the ascetic life, was what defined monastic life in Syria as elsewhere. The monastic life cannot be approached in its fullness, though, unless we also consider the geographical context, the world of the steppe, in which many of the Syrian monasteries flourished. I suggest that the Umayyads’ understanding of the steppe landscape and their use of its built and cultivated spaces was influenced by the pre-existing monastic tradition that members of the caliphal circles encountered there. An anecdote about the Caliph Hishām (724-743) recorded by the ninth-century historian al-Balādhurī captures a moment when these two worlds overlapped:

Hishām fled from the plague and came finally to a monastery (*dayr*). The monk brought him into a garden of his, four *jarībs*² in area and began to give him the tastiest and ripest fruits. Hishām said, ‘Would you sell me your garden?’, but the monk remained silent. Hishām repeated his question, but the monk was still silent. ‘Why do you not speak, O monk? Are you hoping that all the people but you will die?’ ‘Why?’ the monk asked. ‘So that you may gain your fill,’ Hishām said, ‘when everything in the world is left for you’. At that the monk laughed and said, ‘Didn’t you hear that, O Abrash?’. Abrash said [i.e., to the caliph] ‘Aside from him, no free man has ever met you’³.

1 My use of the term ‘late antique’ includes the period of the Umayyad Caliphate, A. H. 41-132/A.D. 661-750.

2 Four *jarībs* is about 6.5 square km.

3 AL-BALĀDHURĪ, *Ansāb al-ashraf* VIB (ed. ATHĀMINA, K. Jerusalem 1993) 70 §129; tr. with slight adjustment CONRAD, L. I., «Historical evidence and the archaeology of early Islam», in SEIKALY, S.; BAALBAKI, R. and DODD, P. (eds), *Quest for understanding: Arabic and Islamic studies in memory of Malcolm H. Kerr* (Beirut 1991) 271.

With these words Hishām's boon companion, Abrash al-Kalbī, attempts to explain to the sole ruler of one of the world's wealthiest and most extensive empires, the layers of paradox that coexist in the steppe: the monk in his cell is free, while the caliph is driven from his urban dwellings into the desert; the ruler offers money for the garden, the ruled has no need for the money - is not, in fact, ruled but has been freed by his way of life; the monk's cell with its garden, like the Syrian monasteries with their water and shelter, stands in stark contrast to the ungenerous, often threatening world around the garden walls.

Al-Balādhurī does not mention placenames in his story of Hishām's encounter with the monk, but it requires no leap of the imagination to accept such a meeting as highly possible, given the caliph's interest in Christian holy men in other literary accounts, a subject we will return to below in the context of al-Ruṣfa. If it were necessary to set the story in connection with some place known to us still today, we could plausibly choose either Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī or al-Ruṣfa, two sites strongly linked with Hishām.

QAṢR AL-ḤAYR AL-GHARBĪ

An expensively produced bronze inscription ascribes construction activity at the site now known as Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī to Hishām in his fourth year as caliph (A. H. 109 / A.D. 727)⁴. The complex included a *qaṣr* with a walled garden, a bath house and the building over whose entrance the inscription was discovered, possibly a khan. The site lies 60 km. south-southwest of Palmyra, near the intersection of the road linking Palmyra with Damascus via Qaryatayn and that from Homs to al-Jawf and eventually al-Ḥijāz. [figure 1] These long-distance routes, especially the former that followed the diagonal northeast-southwest-oriented course of Jabal Rawāq, were also important for local communications and provided access to good hunting grounds (certainly one of Hishām's interests in the area)⁵. In the Roman period, these and related routes had been punctuated with forts and formed part of the larger system of surveillance of Roman interests in Syria and the frontier zone with the Iranian Empire. The region around Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī was primarily pastoral steppeland whose inhabitants were linked in relationships of symbiosis with the villages and market towns in the vicinity, as well as to the southwest toward Damascus and especially to the northwest, toward the major settlements of Homs and Ḥamā and their hinterland.

In the Umayyad period, a sophisticated system of underground canalization provided water for domestic use and irrigation at Hishām's complex. The water supply was conveyed from the artificial lake formed by the Harbaqa dam, located 16 km. south of Qaṣr al-Ḥayr⁶. The enormous Harbaqa dam is believed to have been built in the late first or early second century A.D. and its storage lake of more than one km.² gathered in it the melting snows and seasonal rains that ran off Jabal Rawāq. The extent to which Hishām elaborated, rather than simply refurbished part or all of this complex water system has proven difficult to determine precisely. Both surface and

4 For the publication of Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī, see SCHLUMBERGER, D., 'Les fouilles de Qaṣr el-Heir el-Gharbi (1936-1938): Rapport préliminaire', *Syria* 20 (1939) 195-238, 324-373, reprinted with additional illustrations as SCHLUMBERGER, D., *Qaṣr el-Heir el-Gharbi* (Paris 1986), esp. 26-28 on the Greek and Arabic inscriptions. See also CRESWELL, K. A. C., *Early Muslim Architecture 1: Umayyads AD 622-750* (Oxford 1969²) 506-518.

5 On migration routes and hunting in this area, see FOWDEN, G., '«Desert Sites»: Ethnography, archaeology and art', in HUMPHREY, J. (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East 2* (PORTSMOUTH, R. I. 1999) esp. 121-127.

6 CALLOT, O. in CALVET, Y. and GEYER, B., *Barrages antiques de Syrie* (Lyons 1992) 91, with fig. 49, and 92.

subterranean water conduits channeled the water in various directions, including a cultivated area supplied by a reservoir some 600 m. west of the *qaṣr* and a walled garden still further west. The orchard and garden with its brick enclosure were fed by a system of water distributors and sluices. Imagery from this garden no doubt inspired some of the stucco decoration on the entrance to the *qaṣr*, where trees are depicted heavy with fruit and entwined with bountiful grape vines.

The tower that Hishām incorporated into the northwest corner of his richly-decorated *qaṣr* may well have been built originally as part of the Roman military outpost known on the Tabula Peutingeriana as Heliaramia. Such installations never served a single purpose, but depending on their size functioned variously as garrisons, look-out points, defensive towers, halting places for travellers, even hermitages for ascetics. At Heliaramia, the tower was reused subsequently as part of a monastic complex that made use of the water supply provided by the Roman dam. Excavation at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr has established the site's identification as a monastery by bringing to light a lintel carved with various Greek inscriptions that was later reused as a threshold in Hishām's *qaṣr*. The nature of the inscriptions suggests that their original location was over the monastery entrance, or some other prominent position. They are carved in five separate panels, some by different hands, and have been combined in a slightly varying order by Schlumberger and Jalabert-Mouterde⁷. Nonetheless, the allusions both to a monastery with its archimandrite and to the phylarch Arethas are not disputed.

Panel four gives the date of dedication as '[in the time of such and such] archimandrite and the most pious deacon Anastasios and the most glorious phylarch Arethas'⁸. Here the phylarchate of al-Ḥārith b. Jabala (known in Greek as Arethas), Ghassanid leader and staunch supporter of anti-Chalcedonian, or 'monophysite' Christianity, is incorporated into the very dating of the longer inscription. Panel one, thought to have been carved slightly later on the same limestone lintel, reads like a personal greeting to al-Ḥārith:

[To Flavius] Arethas, patrician, [many] years, [long] life. Great [leader] welcome... the year 870 [A. D. 558/559].

Although these inscriptions do not help to establish the date of the monastery's foundation, they nonetheless confirm the involvement at the monastery of the well-attested Ghassanid phylarch and patrician al-Ḥārith, active from c. 528-569. A precise date is provided in the second text, apparently commemorating a visit to the monastery by the phylarch in person (A.D. 558/559). Al-Ḥārith left a marked impression in the annals of late antique history, both Greek and Syriac, thanks to his twin role as defender of Roman interests against Lakhmid and Sasanian claims in the frontier zone, and as stalwart patron of 'monophysite' Christianity, whose hierarchy was based primarily in the monasteries of Syria and Egypt. And in addition to acting as a political patron of the monophysites in external affairs, he assumed the function of

7 SCHLUMBERGER, *Syria* 20 (1939) 366-72 (= *Qaṣr el-Heir el-Gharbi* 25 with nn. 237, 238 and 239), offered the first description and edition of the inscriptions, later republished by JALABERT-MOUTERDE in *JGLS* 5.240-43. See also the comments by SHAḤĪD, I., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century* (Washington, D.C. 1995) 258-261, 779-780 and 833; and MACCOULL, L. S. B., 'Notes on Arab allies as foederati in inscriptions', *Tyche* 11 (1996) 157-158.

8 It is inaccurate to state that 'the inscription...recorded the building, in 559, of a tower by the Ghassanid Harith/Arethas', as in GREGORY, S., *Roman military architecture on the eastern frontier* (Amsterdam 1995-1997) 184.

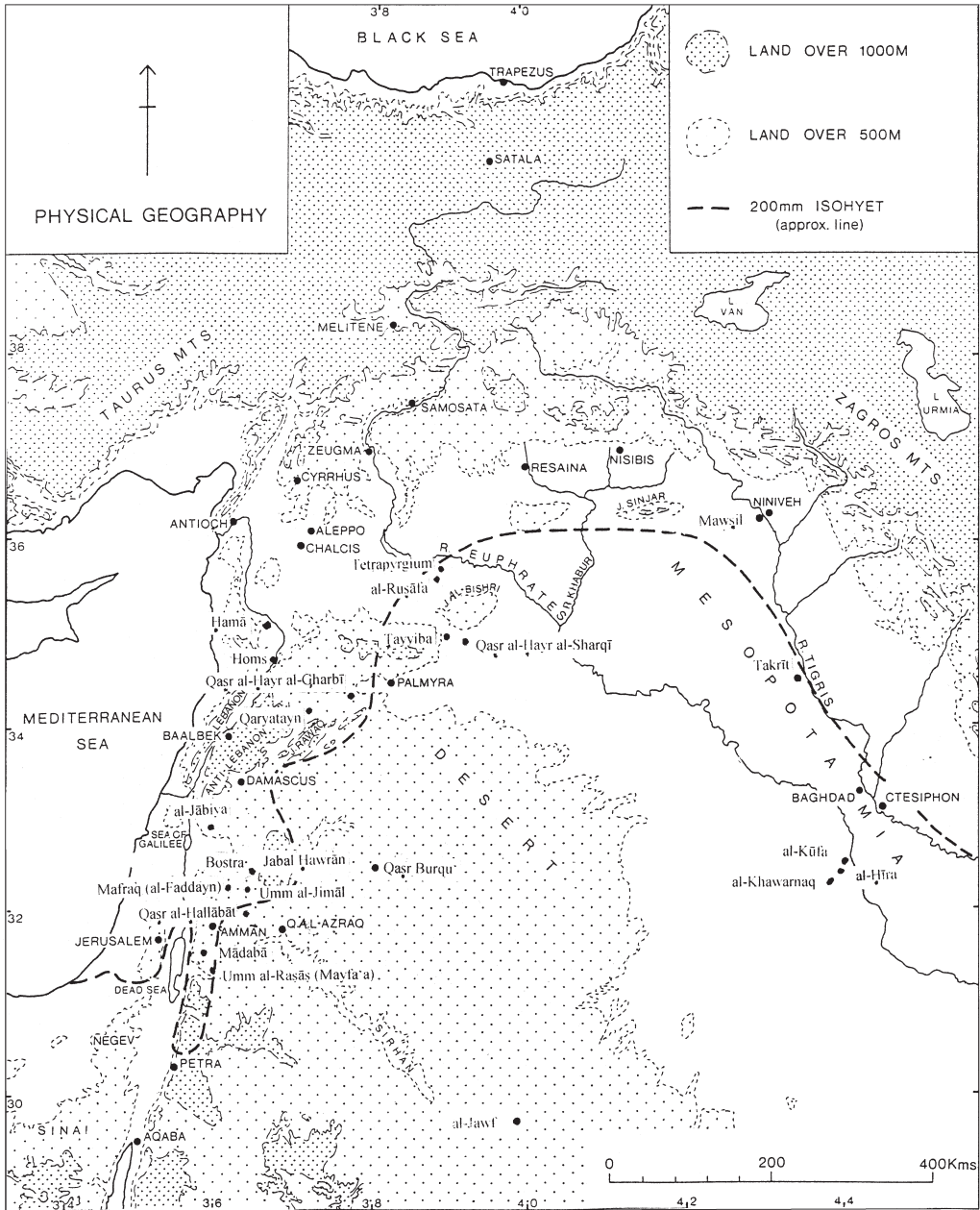


FIGURE 1. Map of Greater Syria in late antiquity (after D. Kennedy, 'Greek, Roman and native cultures in the Roman Near East', in J.H. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East 2: Some recent archaeological research* [Portsmouth 1999] 76, fig. 1.).

mediator between quarreling factions *within* the monophysite communities⁹. The chosen venue for al-Ḥārith's mediation on several occasions was al-Jābiya, the Ghassanid's most famous *ḥirtā*, or permanent encampment, which included dwellings, churches and at least one monastery, dedicated to S. Sergius. On one diplomatic occasion involving a later Ghassanid phylarch, Jafna in 587, our source specifies that the meeting was held in the church of S. Sergius, presumably the catholicon of the aforementioned monastery¹⁰. For al-Ḥārith to have chosen the monastery at Heliaramia as a venue for his efforts in the realm of ecclesiastical politics would not have been surprising, and it is possible that the inscription's greeting and the dating to his phylarchate reflect such a relationship between the phylarch and the religious establishment in the steppe. The monastery is known to have appeared at least once in the literature of the period, when Sergius, the priest and abbot of Haliurim, was listed among the monophysite clerics who signed the so-called 'Letter of the Archimandrites' in 570 against the Tritheist heresy, by which time al-Ḥārith's son and successor, al-Mundhir, had taken his place as defender of the monophysite communities¹¹.

Hishām's reworking of the site over 150 years later has complicated any attempt to understand the monastery's plan and organization. But its indisputable Ghassanid connection combines with its favorable setting and irrigation system to sketch in a picture of a flourishing ascetic oasis in the steppe with a role to play at the level of diplomacy, a striking precedent for the caliph's own development of the site, if Hishām's use of other *quṣūr* is any guide. The acclamation for al-Ḥārith over the entrance evokes a scene in which the phylarch arrives at the monastery, receives the appropriate acclamations, and is led to the catholicon where, as patron of the monophysite community, he participates in the divine liturgy from a position of honor. Following the liturgy he would take up his active role as patron and receive petitions - in other words, hold court. From our literary evidence regarding the Umayyads, and in particular al-Walīd b. Yazīd, we can easily reconstruct a scene in which the Umayyad caliph arrives at a monastery, is shown the sites and then takes up residence in rooms in the monastery where he, like the Ghassanid leader before him, would hold court. A banquet and considerable wine-consumption would also have been part of the Umayyad monastic visit¹². It should not be forgotten that banquets in churches were not unknown in pre-Islamic Christian Arab circles as well¹³.

9 For a lucid account of al-Ḥārith's and, later, his son al-Mundhir's role in the controversy surrounding the consecration of Patriarch Paul of Antioch, a rift with serious repercussions for relations between Syrian and Egyptian monophysites as well as between monophysites and Chalcedonians, see FRENCH, W. H. C., *The rise of the monophysite movement* (Oxford 1972, corrected reprint 1979) 323-330. For analysis of Ghassanid links with monophysite monasteries that builds on THEODOR NÖLDEKE'S important study of the 'Letter of the Archimandrites', 'Zur Topographie und Geschichte des damaszenischen Gebiets und der Haurangegend', *Z. D. M. G.* 29 (1875) 419-44, see SHAHĪD, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century* 825-38.

10 See the 'Letter of the Archimandrites', in CHABOT, J.-B. (ed.), *Documenta ad origines monophysitarum illustrandas* (Paris 1907) 215 (tr. CHABOT, J.-B. [Paris 1933] 149); Michael the Syrian, *Chron.* 10.22 (tr. CHABOT, J.-B. 2.367); see also NÖLDEKE, *Z. D. M. G.* 29 (1875) 430; and AIGRAIN, R., 'L'Arabie' in *Dictionnaire de l'histoire et de la géographie ecclésiastiques* (Paris 1912-) 3:1218-1219.

11 *Documenta* 233 (tr. Chabot 155); see also SHAHĪD, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the sixth century* 833.

12 On caliphal visits to monasteries, see HAMILTON, R., *Walid and his friends. An Umayyad tragedy* (Oxford 1988) 86-91.

13 For example, 'Adī b. Zayd, a celebrated Christian Arab diplomat at the court of Khusrāu II, held a banquet in a church to seal an alliance with some Arab clients: Abū 'l-Faraj al-İṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, ed. MUHANNĀ, 'A.'A. and JĀBIR, S., (Beirut 1982) 2.100. It would be fascinating to know the venue of the most memorable banquet hosted by al-Ḥārith, that in honor of Ephrem, the Patriarch of Antioch, when the latter was served camel meat so that the phylarch

In addition, we should not overlook the fact that Hishām’s prominent re-use of architectural elements from the monastery is unique in the *qusūr* known to have been built on monastic sites. The monastic phase often left little distinct architectural trace, as we shall see at Qasr al-Hallābāt; or the Byzantine material was so thoroughly incorporated as to be no longer separable from the Umayyad, blurring what symbolic message it might have carried. But rather than being demolished and then reincorporated into a new building, the tower at Qasr al-Ḥayr was given a conspicuous place as one of the *qaṣr*’s four corner towers. [figure 2]

Towers were a common feature of monasteries in this region, though the evidence can often be interpreted in diverse ways¹⁴. In general, the multi-purpose nature of towers complicates any effort to arrive at a clear evolution of their use over time. But hermits were known to take up residence in abandoned towers built originally for reasons of security and surveillance, and later

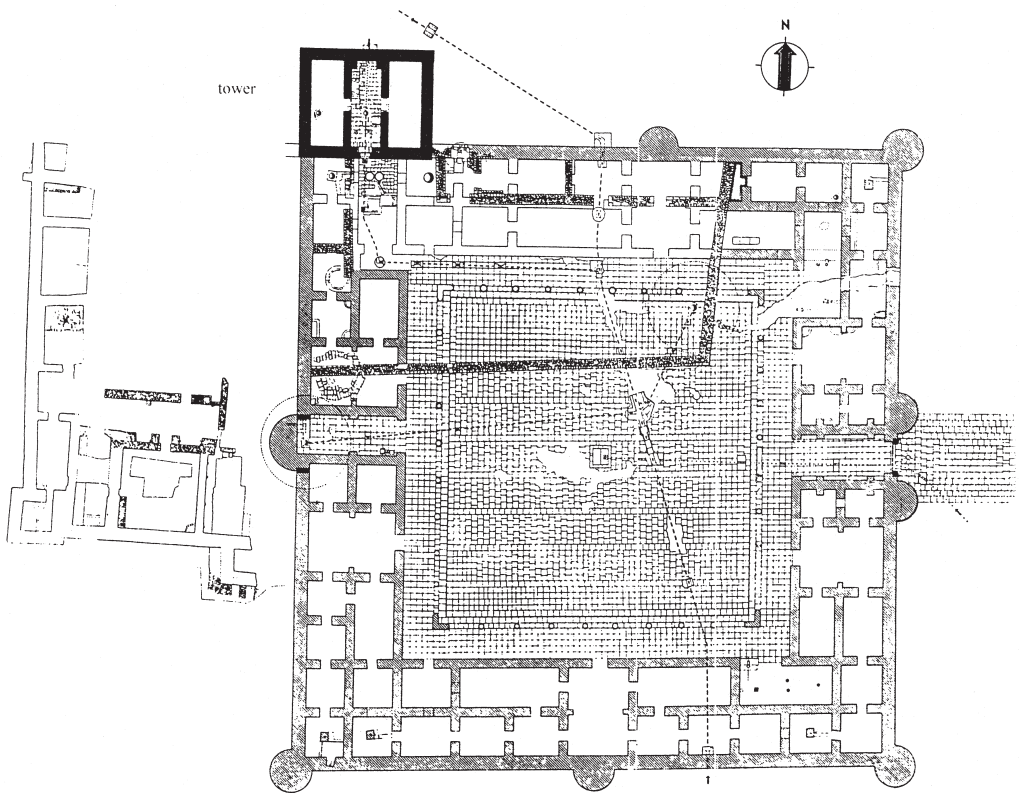


FIGURE 2. Plan of *Qasr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī* (after D. Schlumberger, *Syria* 20 [1939] pl. XXXV, opposite p. 222).

could make a theological point: see MICHAEL THE SYRIAN, *Chron.* 9.29 (tr. CHABOT, 2.246-248). See FOWDEN, E. K., ‘An Arab building at al-Ruṣāfa/Sergiopolis’, *Da. M.* 12 (2000) esp. 312-324.

¹⁴ Numerous examples in northern Syria are cited by PEÑA, I.; CASTELLANA, P. and FERNÁNDEZ, R., *Les reclus Syriens. Recherches sur les anciennes formes de vie solitaire en Syrie* (Milan 1980).

fallen into disuse as the frontier zone came to be controlled instead by Rome's allied Arab tribes¹⁵. The *Life* of Alexander Acoemetes portrays various bands of ascetics wandering in the early fifth-century frontier zone between the Roman and Iranian empires, encountering Roman soldiers, and spending some time in an (inhabited) *castrum* before setting off again to settle in another place¹⁶. One cannot assume, of course, that every *castrum* or tower in late antique Syria housed a recluse¹⁷. But the particular ascetic practice of confining oneself to a tower in order to focus the mind and body on God does appear to have been widespread.

The fortified Roman settlement of Mefaa was located near one of the main routes between Bostra and the Arabian peninsula and the material remains reveal that it was a flourishing site at the steppe's edge in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries. Churches were being built and decorated with luxurious mosaics as late as the mid-eighth century. At Umm al-Raṣās still stands probably the most familiar example of a monk's tower. The 14 m. high structure, with its single, small door, rises up from the middle of a square courtyard with a small church at its southeast corner. Nearby there are cisterns hewn into the live rock and stone quarries. The powerful image of the monk in his tower left its impression in a poem ruminating on the fleeting nature of all human existence, even that of holy men, that is attributed to Dhū Jadān, a pre-Islamic Himyarite nobleman:

For death no man can hold back
though he drink the perfumed potions of the quack,
nor monk in his secluded cell on high
where the vulture round his nest dost fly¹⁸.

The monk in the steppe becomes a symbol of welcome in the wilderness, but also of seclusion - the same contrasts that emerged from Hishām's encounter with the monk and his garden.

Another, lesser known example of what has been identified as a hermit's tower is to be found at Qaṣr Burqu' located to the east of Bostra at the point where the steppe and the eastern edge of the basalt desert, the *harra*, meet. Qaṣr Burqu' was subsequently transformed into a small Umayyad *qaṣr*, making it an interesting parallel - though dramatically less impressive in terms of its architecture - to Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī. Qaṣr Burqu' is a simple irregular square courtyard with rooms on two sides, in the midst of which stands, with a different orientation, a late Roman tower that survives up to a height of three storeys and probably once rose to more than twelve meters¹⁹. [figure 3] Built of local stone, the tower's architectural style is related to that familiar

15 For a discussion of the evolution of the frontier zone in the context of the northern region of the modern state of Jordan, see MACADAM, H. I., 'Some notes on the Umayyad occupation of north-east Jordan', in FREEMAN, P. and KENNEDY, D. (eds), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East* (Oxford 1986) esp. 536-540.

16 For a discussion of the *Life*, with an eye to the frontier zone, see GATIER, P.-L., 'Un moine sur la frontière, Alexandre l'Acémète en Syrie', in ROUSSELLE, A. (ed.), *Frontières terrestres, frontières célestes dans l'antiquité* (Paris 1995) 441-455.

17 Note, for example, the extreme scepticism of TATE, G., *Les campagnes de la Syrie du Nord* (Paris 1992) 48-51. A middle ground must be sought between interpreting towers as purpose-built havens for hermits and maintaining a blindspot to the multiple uses to which towers may have been put subsequent to their construction.

18 In Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 26 (tr. 19).

19 For descriptions of the site, see DAY, F. E., 'Appendix E: Historical notes on Burqu', Bayir and Dauqara', in FIELD, H. et al., *North Arabian desert archaeological survey, 1925-1950* (Cambridge, MA 1960) 150-158, with drawing of lintel with cross on p. 156; also SCHROEDER, E. and FIELD, H., 'Field Museum North Arabian desert expedition,

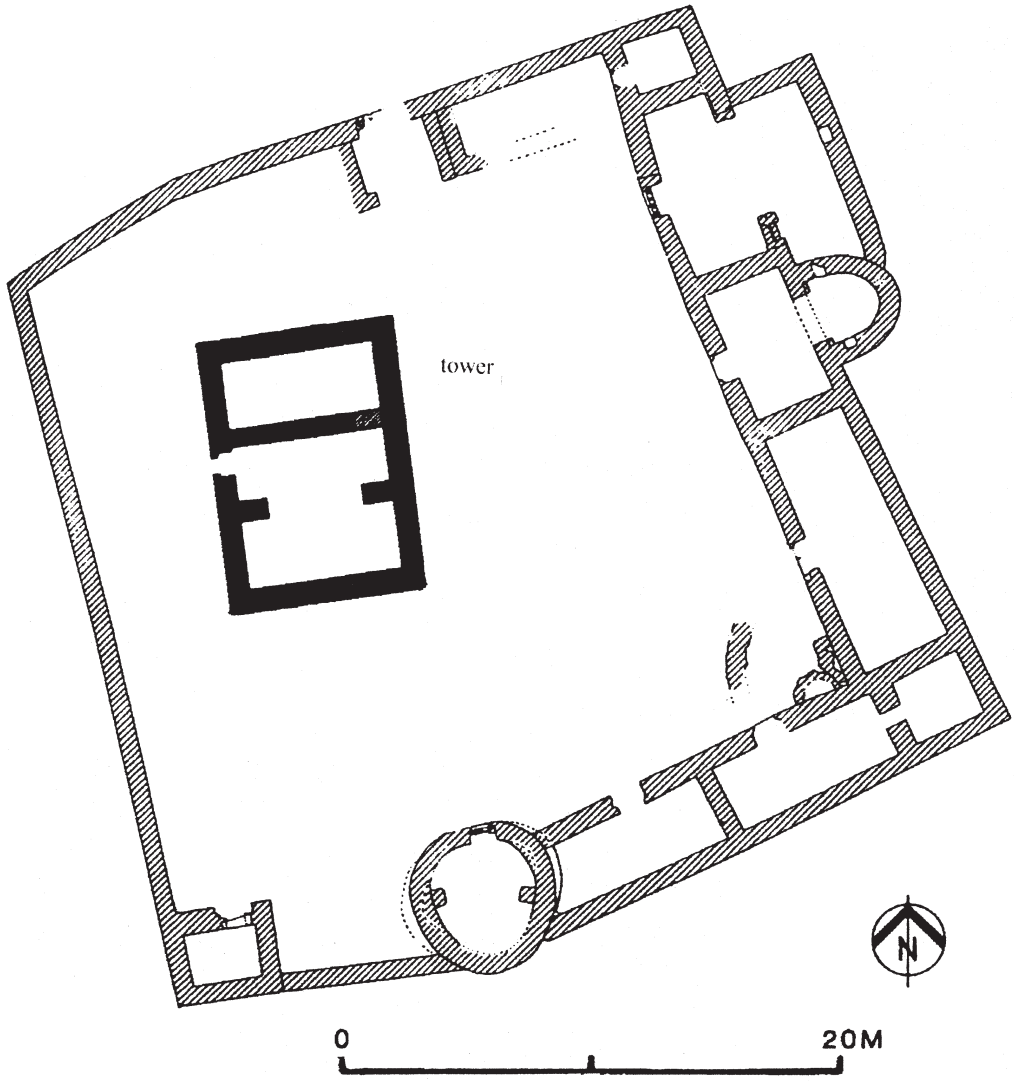


FIGURE 3. *Plan of Qasr Burqu'* (after D. Kennedy, *The Roman army in Jordan* [London 2000] 75, fig. 8.15).

from the Jabal Hawrān to the west. The setting is exposed and arid, the effects of which could be dangerously disorienting, as one traveller reported during a sweltering April expedition in 1928: ‘we were anxiously looking for Qasr el-Burqu but the mirage shortened our horizon, and what proved eventually to be the top of the tower at Burqu was decided to be but a tuft of grass.’²⁰ Despite the occasional deceptiveness of natural phenomena, there can be no doubt that the tower acted as a valuable marker in the open landscape. Qaṣr Burqu‘ overlooks the Wadi Minqat, which was dammed to form a lake that would have been a significant feature in the desolate surroundings²¹.

The tower - surrounded by either the ruinous stone structures that survive, at least one of which may be contemporary with the tower²², or more ephemeral buildings - would have served as a habitation and storehouse, and as a watch tower and stronghold in the desert. The damaged Greek inscription «Respect the Lord» (?) and a cross carved over a lintel suggest a Christian presence, though the dating and precise nature of this presence is undeterminable on the basis of present evidence. Umayyad involvement at the site is unequivocally attested by an inscription recording the erection of unidentified structures (*al-buyūt*) by al-Walīd I in A. H. 81/A.D. 700, while he was still heir apparent during his father ‘Abd al-Malik’s caliphate²³. What is clear architecturally is that the square enclosure of the *qaṣr* was built around the tower, rather than incorporating it as one of the enclosure’s four corner towers as at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr. In both places, however, a plausible interpretation of the material evidence is that a tower was originally built as part of the Roman system of surveillance for the frontier zone, used from its conception for a variety of purposes, and occupied later by an ascetic community of unknown size, supported by the local water supply. Perhaps due to the general insecurity of the seventh century, particularly between A.D. 610 and 640, the sites ceased to function as monasteries and were later re-occupied by members of the Umayyad elite. How much time elapsed (possibly none at Qaṣr Burqu²⁴) between these Christian and Umayyad occupations, we cannot know at this point.

Before we leave these examples of diachronic sharing of the same site by monasteries and *quṣūr*, brief mention should be made of two other sites that, according to recent investigation, also fall into this category: al-Faddayn and Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt, both located on the northwestern fringes of the Balqā’, which was home to a notable concentration of Umayyad *quṣūr*²⁵.

1928’, in FIELD et al., *North Arabian desert* 57-58, quoting Gertrude Bell’s brief report from 1913; and SCHROEDER, ‘Architectural report’, in FIELD et al., *North Arabian desert* 95-99. For the context of the sites and structures at Qaṣr Burqu’, see KING, G. R. D., ‘The distribution of sites and routes in the Jordanian and Syrian deserts in the early Islamic period’, in *Proceedings of the seminar for Arabian studies* 17 (1987) 91-105, esp. 93 where he describes Qaṣr Burqu’ as ‘used as a monastery deep in the desert’; and most recently HELMS, S., *Early Islamic architecture of the desert. A bedouin station in eastern Jordan* (Edinburgh 1990) 50-66.

20 SCHROEDER and FIELD, ‘Field Museum North Arabian desert expedition, 1928’, in FIELD et al., *North Arabian desert* 57.

21 HELMS, *Early Islamic architecture* 59.

22 GAUBE, ‘An examination of the ruins at Qaṣr Burqu’’, *A. D. A. J.* 19 (1974) 93-100; HELMS, *Early Islamic architecture* 60-66.

23 HELMS, *Early Islamic architecture* 57.

24 HELMS, *Early Islamic architecture* 58-59.

25 No doubt the densest concentration of *diyārāt* and *quṣūr* was in the vicinity of Damascus and the Ghuta, though all physical traces are now lost to thanks to constant development over the centuries. For example, the fame of Dayr Murrān, overlooking the Ghūṭa from the slopes of Jabal Qaysūn, extended well beyond the Umayyad period, when it was frequented by several caliphs, including al-Walīd I (who died there) and al-Walīd II (who drank there): cf. SOURCEL, D., *EF* 2.198.

The site of al-Faddayn, just north of Mafraq's center, possesses a spring and a reservoir, and was integrated into the network of roads connected with the *Via Nova Traiana*. Excavation has uncovered traces of a monastery at the site, confirming the testimony in the 'Letter of the Archimandrites' that includes the signature of a presbyter and an archimandrite from the monastery at Phedin²⁶. On the ground have been found a large enclosed courtyard and the apse, nave and side aisles of a small church. Because the Byzantine complex was incorporated into a later, Umayyad mansion, mosque and bath house, it has proven difficult to explore further the Christian phase²⁷. In the early to mid-eighth century, the *qaṣr* at al-Faddayn was owned by Sa'īd b. Khālīd b. 'Amr b. 'Uthmān b. 'Affān and is known to have been visited by both Yazīd II, the brother of Hishām, and his son, al-Walīd II²⁸.

Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt is a Roman fort located some 18 km. southeast of the *Via Nova Traiana* between Bostra and Philadelphia ('Ammān). It lies on a migratory route from al-Azraq to the southeast. The site may already have been occupied by a Nabatean watch tower when, under Trajan or soon afterward, a small fort was built to house a Roman garrison guarding the route to the Azraq oasis and, in general, keep watch over the region's inhabitants. This simple square fort with rooms around a central courtyard underwent various phases of expansion and alteration, including the addition of four corner towers in 529, according to an inscription. Another inscription, now lost, allegedly recorded a monastic presence. This stone was noted (though never transcribed) in the twentieth century by Rees and Harding, and the latter reported that 'some time in the seventh century it [Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt] became a monastic establishment and an inscription recording this fact is now built into the main gate of the Arab legion camp at Zerka'²⁹. David Kennedy, who has studied the site extensively, considers it quite plausible that the site was occupied by monks in the seventh century, and has drawn attention to the fact that crosses were carved on the basalt blocks at conspicuous places, including on the upright to the right of the main gateway³⁰. It has also been suggested that the largest room (4) may have been a chapel³¹. Umayyad reoccupation of the fort is clearly signalled by the reuse of stone, replastering of internal walls and the mosaic floors that have come to light during the excavations by Gazi Bisheh³². Other sites can be named that are thought to have been used at one time as monasteries and later refitted for Umayyad occupation - Qaṣr al-Bā'ij near Umm al-Jimāl, for instance; Dayr al-Kahf, 40 km. southeast of Bostra; and Dayr al-Qinn, 11 km. northeast of Dayr al-Kahf. But other than scanty remains on the ground, nothing else is known of these sites. It is more

26 *Documenta* 217 (tr. Chabot 150).

27 HUMBERT, J.-B., 'El-Fedein/Mafraq', *Liber Annuus* 36 (1986) 354-358, HUMBERT, J.-B., 'El-Fedein/Mafraq: Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française', in *Contribution française à l'archéologie jordanienne* ('Ammān 1989) 125-31 with site plan at end of article, and MICHEL, A., *Les églises d'époque byzantine et umayyade de Jordanie (provinces d'Arabie et de Palestine) Ve-VIIIe siècle: Typologie architecturale et aménagements liturgiques (avec catalogue des monuments)* (Turnhout 2001) 224.

28 On the Umayyad history of the *qaṣr*, see FOWDEN, G., *Quṣayr 'Amra. Art and the Umayyad elite in late antique Syria* (Berkeley, forthcoming 2004) ch. 5.

29 HARDING, G. L., *The antiquities of Jordan* (Guildford 1967²) 154.

30 KENNEDY, D. L., *Archaeological explorations on the Roman frontier in north-east Jordan. The Roman and Byzantine military installations and road network on the ground and from the air* (Oxford 1982) 17-68, esp. 40-41, 50, 53, and the map on p. 4; Kennedy has recently reiterated his confidence in Harding's report of the inscription and the likelihood of a seventh-century monastery at the site: KENNEDY, D. L., *The Roman army in Jordan* (London 2000) 95.

31 GREGORY, *Roman military architecture* 293.

32 BISHEH, G., 'From castellum to palatium: Umayyad mosaic pavements from Qaṣr al-Ḥallābāt in Jordan', *Muqarnas* 10 (1993) 49-56.

instructive, instead, to turn to the most impressive example of contemporary sharing of a single site by both *dayr* and *qaṣr* in the late antique period.

RUṢAFĀT HISHĀM

The late twelfth-/early thirteenth-century geographer Yāqūt al-Rūmī (born in Byzantine territory, but taken prisoner at an early age and raised in Baghdād as a Muslim) described ‘a monastery [*dayr*] in the town of Ruṣāfa of Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik, which is a day’s march from Raqqa for those who are laden... I myself have seen this monastery and it is one of the wonders of the world as regards its beauty and its architecture. I believe that Hishām built his *madīna* [meaning the extra muros development] next to this monastery [*dayr*] and that the latter existed before the *madīna*. There are monks in it and churches. It stands in the middle of the town [of al-Ruṣāfa]’³³. He also says that Hishām turned his attentions to al-Ruṣāfa at a time when the plague was raging, and that he would go there in the summer months. Yāqūt does not claim that Hishām’s was the first construction there, but rather adds that the wells Hishām used were dug by the Ghassanids who had a residence there before him³⁴. Such a pedigree is no surprise given our other evidence of Ghassanid involvement at al-Ruṣāfa, though Yāqūt is the only literary mention of a pre-Islamic *qaṣr* at al-Ruṣāfa.

The attraction of al-Ruṣāfa to both Ghassanids and Umayyads cannot be explained without reference to the soldier-martyr whose body was revered within the city walls. Though al-Ruṣāfa was not a natural, spring-fed oasis like Tayyiba or Palmyra, sites also located along the Strata Diocletiana, waters did gather in the wadi there. Still, this is not sufficient to explain the unique architectural and religious developments the site witnessed. The sixth-century pilgrim to the saint’s shrine entered the massive gypsum walls of the city through one of the monumental gates and beheld within a densely built-up town punctuated with churches, the most prominent of which dominated the southeastern corner of the walled space. This three-aisled basilica of the familiar Syrian type, known today as Basilica A, or the Great Basilica, housed the martyr’s reliquary in a shrine just northeast of the apse. The pilgrim approached this shrine either from the north aisle of the Great Basilica, or from a door on the basilica’s northeast end, which led into the side chapel from a spacious north courtyard³⁵.

Immediately to the south of the Great Basilica is an area that underwent various stages of reworking. It has been suggested that what we have are the remains of episcopal quarters and also a monastery³⁶. The history of monastic life at al-Ruṣāfa can be reconstructed only with difficulty given the paucity of both literary and architectural evidence. That a monastic community was drawn to the holiness of the place is certain, and we hear of an abbot of ‘Rasiphta’ before we learn that Hishām was attracted to the monastery and Yāqūt was impressed by the monks within the city walls³⁷.

33 YĀQŪT, *Mu‘jam al-buldān* 2.510, s.v. *Dayr al-Ruṣāfa* (Beirut edition 1955-57).

34 YĀQŪT, *Mu‘jam* 3.47-48, s.v. *Ruṣāfatu al-Hishām*.

35 ULBERT, T., *Resafa 2: Die Basilika des Heiligen Kreuzes in Resafa-Sergiupolis* (Mainz 1986) 43-62, 171-77.

36 ULBERT, *Resafa* 2.118-27, 144-45; also ULBERT, T., *Resafa 3: Die Kreuzfahrerzeitliche Silberschatz aus Resafa-Sergiupolis* (Mainz 1990) 3.

37 The literary evidence for a (possibly sixth-century) monastery at al-Ruṣāfa appears in a colophon of a manuscript that belonged to a certain Zooras, son of Paul of Takrīt, who gave it to the Syrian monastery in Scetis, and is signed by ‘the humble sinner Joseph, bishop of the holy monastery of Rasiphta’: ASSEMANI, J. S., *Bibliotheca orientalis* (Rome 1719-

People from across the socio-economic and cultural spectrum of Syria, but also from further afield in the Roman and Iranian empires, appealed to the martyr's power; and their veneration for S. Sergius was reflected in the grandeur of the architecture and decoration that surrounded his tomb³⁸. While Sergius of Rusāfa received gifts from Roman emperors and Sasanian monarchs, reverence for the miracle-worker and soldier saint was particularly rooted among the region's Christian Arab tribes. The walled settlement, its shrine and its monastery, served as a place of convergence on important migratory and trade routes used by the Arab pastoralists, semi-pastoralists and merchants of the region. Ghassanid use of al-Ruṣāfa as a point of convergence has been widely recognized since Sauvaget's well-known discussion in 1939 of the stone structure with the al-Mundhir inscription, located just to the north of the walls³⁹. Thanks to its water supply and gardens, its situation at the intersection of routes and particularly its pilgrimage shrine of Sergius, al-Ruṣāfa prospered in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries as a *ḥaram* where tribes from the entire region of Syria and Mesopotamia would meet. It was this gathering together of a wide range of the area's inhabitants that caught the attention of political leaders such as Anastasius, Justinian and Theodora, Khusrau II and al-Mundhir.

The value of such a location was not lost on Hishām. His involvement at al-Ruṣāfa should be seen in the light of the more general current discussion of the function of the Umayyad *qusūr*. Recent studies have emphasized the multiple and specifically Umayyad purposes of these complexes, particularly their role in making the dynasty's presence felt in the steppe and facilitating surveillance of the tribes on which the dynasty relied for the maintenance of its own authority in the region⁴⁰. At sites in the Balqā, members of the Umayyad elite, such as al-Walīd I, Yazīd II and his son al-Walīd II, either built afresh or reused abandoned material in order to make conspicuous the Umayyad presence among their subject Arab tribes. At al-Ruṣāfa the situation was different since Hishām found already in place a settlement and pilgrimage center that had been understood by previous rulers as a point of convergence for the region's inhabitants where political as well as religious authority could be reinforced. He did not, then, attempt to stem the tide of Arab Christian pilgrims, but encouraged devotion to the holy man Sargis by

1928) 1:117. Assemani suggested that Zooras might be identified with the anti-Chalcedonian stylite who baptized the Empress Theodora in 535. Archaeological investigation at Tetrapyrgium, a fourth-century *castrum* on the Strata Diocletiana between Sura and al-Ruṣāfa, has revealed intense occupation of the site, both within the fort and in the *vicus* surrounding it, in the fifth and sixth centuries. This flourishing corresponds to the parallel rise in al-Ruṣāfa's fame as a pilgrimage site. In addition, a monastery was built within the fort, no doubt benefiting from its nearness to al-Ruṣāfa's miracle-working saint. The monastery took the form of cells around a courtyard in which was set a small church with a square apse and flanking rooms, and has been dated to the early to mid-eighth century, according to the most recent study of the evidence: see the interpretation by ULBERT, T. in KONRAD, M., *Resafa 5: Der spätrömische Limes in Syrien* (Mainz am Rhein 2001) 64-68, though the critical numismatic evidence, and its context, is problematic.

38 On the cult of S. Sergius at al-Ruṣāfa, see FOWDEN, E. K., *The Barbarian Plain. Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley 1999).

39 For more recent consideration of the building in its architectural and cultural contexts, see G. Brands, 'Der sogenannte Audienzsaal des al-Mundhir in Resafa', *Da. M.* 10 (1998) 211-35 and Fowden, *Da.M.* 12 (2001) 303-24.

40 For discussions of *qusūr* in this light, see GAUBE, H., 'Die syrischen Wüstenschlösser. Einige wirtschaftliche und politische Gesichtspunkte zu ihrer Entstehung', *Z. D. P.-V.* 95 (1979) esp. 196-209; CONRAD, L. I. 'The *qusūr* of medieval Islam: Some implications for the social history of the Near East,' *Al-Abhath* 29 (1981) 7-23; MACADAM, H. I., 'Some notes on the Umayyad occupation of northeastern Jordan', in FREEMAN and KENNEDY (eds), *The defence of the Roman and Byzantine East 531-547*; KING, G. R. D., 'Settlement patterns in Islamic Jordan: the Umayyads and their use of the land', in *Studies in the history and archaeology of Jordan* 4 (Amman 1992) 369-375; FOWDEN, *Qusayr 'Amra*, esp. ch. 9.

binding a monumental mosque to the church's north courtyard⁴¹. [figure 4] Thanks to this architectural arrangement, unique y preserved in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, the Muslim pilgrim to S. Sergius's shrine crossed directly through a door in the mosque's *qibla* wall into the shared arcaded courtyard and thence into the chapel at the eastern end of the Great Basilica in order to reverence the saint's relics. It is important to emphasize that the ground on which Hishām had his mosque built was riddled with dolines, and difficulties must have been encountered because of these circumstances already from the time of construction. In other words, it took determination and strong motives to build on this site. While there is no reason to diminish the role played by Hishām's personal attachment to the saint, we should not forget that the caliph was also politically shrewd. Hishām's persistence in choosing this site underlines the magnetic power of the entire pilgrimage complex, certainly including the monastery later admired by Yāqūt, that was worked by the miracle-working saint on Hishām's subjects, a power that the caliph wanted to tap into. In doing this he was following the precedent set by the great pre-Islamic Arab leaders of Syria, the Ghassanids, whose association with Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī should also be recalled in this connection.

In addition to this extraordinary mosque, Hishām also built his *madīna* in what we assume was a more or less open space to the south and east of al-Ruṣāfa's glittering gypsum walls. Like Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī, al-Ruṣāfa depended on exploitation of the local wadis and the use of canalization and water storage to maintain the gardens the inhabitants and visitors required. There appear to have been at least five *quṣūr*, one of which has been partly excavated, with another thirty or so smaller structures that would have together made up the caliphal *madīna* housing Hishām, his extended family and court. Excavation of one large square *qaṣr* (roughly 70 meters square) with living quarters arranged around the central courtyard has brought to light stucco decoration and painting of high quality⁴². In among the walled residences spread gardens and pavilions with their elaborate painted stucco decorations, only tantalizing fragments of which have survived⁴³.

Little of this suburban area has been scientifically explored, but structural outlines show up clearly in a splendid aerial photograph published by Maurice Dunand in 1953⁴⁴. In our efforts to recreate Hishām's Ruṣāfa, the most useful complement to this photograph are the descriptions of al-Ḥīra, the famously salubrious Lakhmid settlement that spread out between the Euphrates and the desert. At al-Ḥīra, public spaces, markets, pasture, crop fields and gardens grew up between loosely inter-related walled quarters (called *quṣūr*) that enclosed dwellings (*buyūt*) and churches, while larger *quṣūr* and monasteries spread out close by and in the surrounding countryside, each with its own walled garden⁴⁵. The sixth century was a time of great prosperity in al-Ḥīra and its hinterland, as it was also at al-Ruṣāfa. The latter lived on as an Umayyad center, whereas al-Ḥīra

41 SACK, D., *Resafa 4: Die Grosse Moschee von Resafa-Ruṣāfat Hiṣām* (Mainz 1996) passim, esp. 41-42 on the *qibla* wall. For a discussion of the Islamicization of the holy site at al-Ruṣāfa, as well as at Damascus and Jerusalem, see FOWDEN, E. K. 'Sharing holy places', *Common Knowledge* 8 (2002) 124-146.

42 OTTO-DORN, K., 'Grabung im umayyadischen Ruṣāfah', *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957) 119-133.

43 ULBERT, T., 'Ein umayyadischer Pavillon in Resafa-Ruṣāfat Hiṣām', *Da. M.* 7 (1993) 213-231.

44 DUNAND, M., *De l'Amanus au Sinai. Sites et monuments* (Beirut 1953) 140, top photograph.

45 TALBOT RICE, D., 'The Oxford excavations at Hīra', *Ars Islamica* 1 (1934) 51-58 and figs 5, 6, 7, for plans and a photograph of painting in an excavated church. AL-BALĀDHURĪ, *Futūḥ al-buldān* 244, attests the porous nature of the nonetheless urban settlement at al-Ḥīra in his account of its capture in A. H. 12/A. D. 633, when Muslim cavalry rode into the open spaces between the built-up areas. See also ROTHSTEIN, G., *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Ḥīra* (Berlin 1899) 12-17.

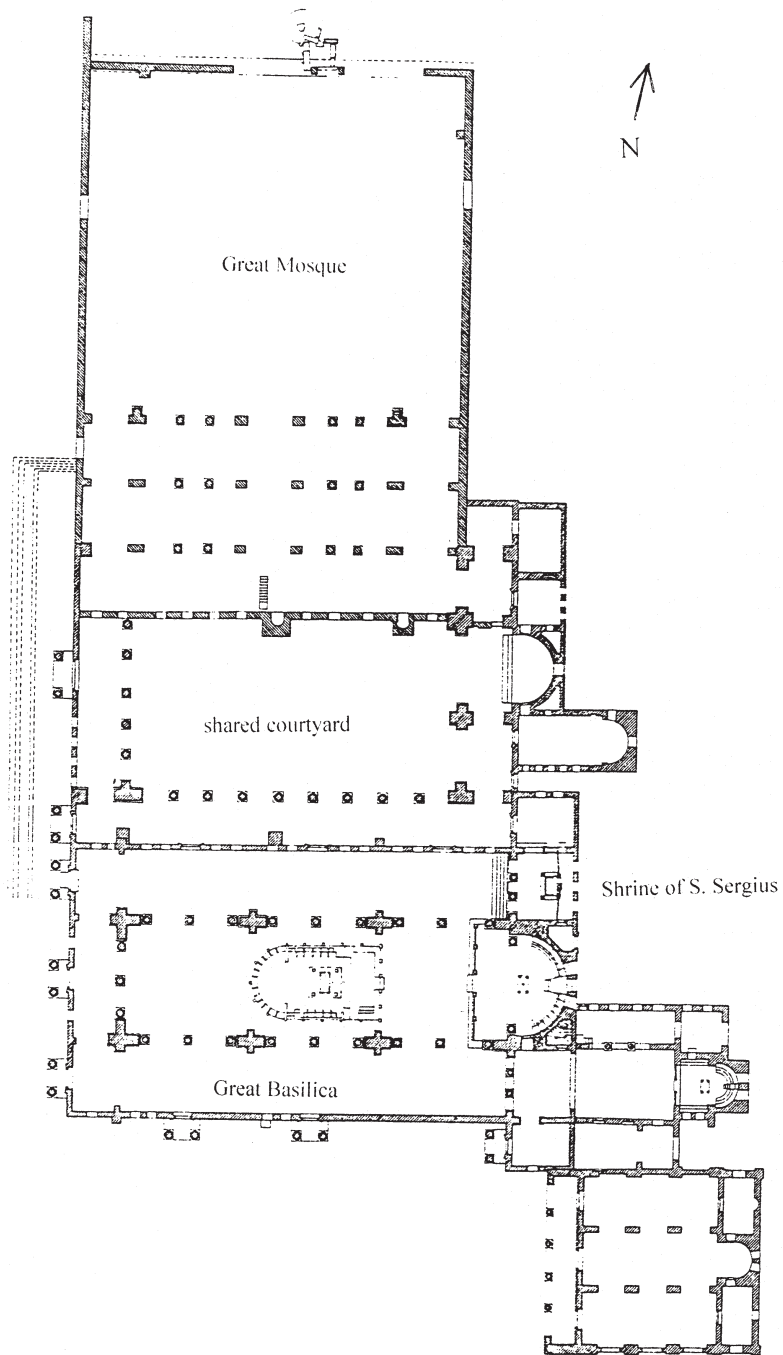


FIGURE 4. Plan of Great Basilica and Great Mosque with shared courtyard, al-Ruṣāfa (after D. Sack, *Resafa 4: Die Grosse Moschee von Resafa-Ruṣāfat Hiṣam* [Mainz 1996] pl. 71).

gradually began to be overshadowed by al-Kūfa, a new Islamic settlement nearby, as the region's urban hub. But the process was slow, and certainly al-Ḥīra's surrounding monasteries and country residences, especially al-Khawarnaq (on which more shortly), continued to fulfill the same needs even though the masters had changed.

As points of convergence in the steppe, the overlapping roles that monasteries assumed were practical, social, spiritual and aesthetic. There also existed a political dimension which cannot be separated from the others. We have already seen this in the case of Ghassanid relations with monasteries, as patrons and mediators and in the involvement of a variety of political leaders who chose the pilgrimage complex of al-Ruṣāfa as a backdrop against which to display their influence. The *quṣūr*, like the monasteries, are characterized by this same overlapping of functions, with the difference that the spiritual is much less conspicuous - though in this case too, the caliph's role as successor to the Prophet lay behind his authority to sit in judgement in his *majlis*, or audience chamber.

AL-KHAWARNAQ

The *qaṣr* most renowned for its associations with power and prestige was al-Khawarnaq, near al-Ḥīra. The story of al-Khawarnaq and its builder, the Lakhmid sovereign al-Nu'mān I (c.400-c.418), and of its association with the famous Sasanian hunter-monarch Bahram V Gūr (420-438) became the stuff of legend in Arabic and later Persian literature⁴⁶. Hishām b. al-Kalbī, a native of eighth-century al-Kūfa and an important source for pre-Islamic Arab history, recounts that:

Al-Nu'mān sat one spring day in his audience chamber at al-Khawarnaq and looked down at al-Najaf, with the gardens, date-palms, orchards, and canals adjoining it, on his western side, and down at the Euphrates on his eastern side, he being on the ridge of al-Najaf. He was pleased with all the greenness, the flowers, and the water courses he could see, and exclaimed to his vizier and companion, 'Have you ever seen the like of this view?' The vizier replied, 'No; if only it were to last!' The king said, 'What then endures?' He replied, 'That which is with God in the next world.' The king asked, 'How can that be attained?' He replied, 'By your abandoning this present world, by devoting yourself to God and by seeking that which is laid up with Him.' So the king renounced his kingdom that very night; he put on coarse garments and left secretly in flight, without anybody knowing.⁴⁷

'Adī b. Zayd, the Arab Christian poet from al-Ḥīra who flourished in the second half of the sixth century as a diplomat at both the Sasanian and the Lakhmid courts, used the story in one of his poems meditating on the decay of mortal fame⁴⁸. Later, the Umayyads are known to have enjoyed the pleasures afforded by al-Khawarnaq and its surroundings. It was in many ways a precursor to the *quṣūr* they would later build for themselves. After his victory near al-Kūfa in the autumn of A. H. 71/ A.D. 690 or A. H. 72/A. D. 691, 'Abd al-Malik, the father of Hishām,

46 On the history and legends of al-Khawarnaq, see PANTKE, M., *Der arabische Bahrām-Roman. Untersuchungen zur Quellen- und Stoffgeschichte* (Berlin 1974) 52-68.

47 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rikh* 1.853 (ed. GOEJE, M. J. de, et al.; tr. BOSWORTH, C. E., 5.80-81).

48 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rikh* 1.853-54 (tr. 5.81); cf. also AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-aghānī* 2.131-32.

ordered a banquet to be prepared at al-Khawarnaq. The sumptuousness of the food and the beauty of the setting - with its already legendary resonances - inspired him to comment to his companions on the fleeting nature of man and all his efforts. 'How pleasant our life is! If only anything lasted!' and, quoting a well-known line, 'Everything new, O Umaymah, goes toward decay; and every man will some day become a has-been.'⁴⁹

This famously well-positioned *qaṣr* came to be closely associated by the Umayyads and still later rulers with the powerful story of a king who relinquished the most a mortal could attain in order to become a penniless, roofless wanderer. Some four decades after his father's celebrated banquet, Hishām received a delegation from Iraq at his court at al-Rusāfa. The group included the eloquent orator and transmitter of poetry, Khālid b. Ṣafwān b. al-Ahtam. After being shown in, Khālid invoked God's blessings on the caliph and proceeded to recite the story of al-Khawarnaq and its lord. When Khālid had finished, the lord of al-Ruṣāfa - his beard and turban moist with tears - had them all dismissed and shut himself up in his *qaṣr*. One of Hishām's mawālī hastily chastised the orator for his indelicate choice of subject, but Khālid responded that he had resolved never to sit with a king without speaking to him of God⁵⁰.

These traditions about al-Khawarnaq further confirm that there was more to the *quṣūr* than self-indulgence, or even exercise of political power in the steppe. The *qaṣr* also represented flight from the city in favor of a simpler life - as Abū Qatīfa (d. before 693) so famously put it in his much-quoted verses expressing a preference for the *qaṣr* and its palm grove to all the glories of Damascus⁵¹. The *qaṣr*, perhaps because of the contrast it set up between the arid steppe on the one hand, and pleasure and politics on the other, could lead the mind toward denial of the world and an embracing of more spiritual preoccupations. It was not so great a leap from al-Nu'mān's gesture to the monastic life as traditionally lived by Christians. And there is also the fact that monks 'seeking the good pleasure of God'⁵² received favorable consideration in the *Qur'an*. The Muslim who encountered a monk or monastery in the steppe could not possibly have failed to recall those Qur'anic monks - or the many prophetic monks who appear in Islamic tradition, such as Bahīrā and the monk of Mayfa'a, who was said to have advised a pre-Islamic monotheist to await a new prophet in Arabia⁵³. Ultimately, as any monk knew, and as even an Umayyad caliph might occasionally divine, the paradox of plenty in the steppe held the power to act as a goad to return to the bare essentials, the way of the original ascetics who wandered the steppe, settling at a source of water, in an old tower - round which a monastic community, with all its potential distractions from the bare essentials, would gradually arise.

49 AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'riḫh* 2.819-21 (tr. M. Fishbein 21.195-196).

50 AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-aghānī* 2.128-32.

51 AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Kitāb al-aghānī* 1.9, 13, 52-54.

52 *Qur'an* 57.27.

53 IBN IṢHĀQ, *Sirat Rasūl Allāh* 115-16 (ed. WÜSTENFELD, F.); (tr. 79-81 GUILLAUME, A.) for Bahīra; 148-149 (tr. 102-103) for Mayfa'a monk. Guillaume mistranslates 'at Mayfa'a' (no doubt an unfamiliar toponym to him) as 'in the high ground'.

