of their own integrity, so also they avoided grafting onto them anything new unless it was necessary or until they felt sufficiently secure to be able to do so.

The use of writing was not limited to monuments. As Islam settled in the conquered lands, it became an immensely literary culture, in which the written word was the main vehicle of thought and communication. But, because of the sacredness of the Word, next to the normal growth of a variety of scripts there occurred an art of calligraphy which soon became a most uniquely Muslim art. It is one of the few artistic techniques about which we are fairly well informed through literary sources. Since the many remaining fragments of Korans have never been properly studied from paleographic and formal points of view, only a few general remarks can be made. First, most of these Koranic pages (fig. 57) are very difficult to read, for they lack diacritical marks and other aids developed over the centuries to clarify the Arabic script. This difficulty is explained if we recall that the beholder knew the Koran and found a minimal “sign” sufficient. An art of calligraphy, whatever its abstract values visible to all, very much presupposes a full knowledge of the text, but is this not true of any religious art—that it can be fully understood only if its sense is already known? Then, calligraphy in early Islam cannot be seen as writing alone, for it was but the most important impulse for the formation of a whole art of the book with a host of ancillary techniques. Little though it is known before the twelfth century, this art of the book became, far more than the mosque, the Muslim’s most sacred personal experience.

Since the last chapter will return to some of the implications suggested by the preceding discussion, the conclusion here is limited to summary answers to the following three questions. What is it, if anything, that Islam created that appears to be unique because of its being Muslim? And what does it tell us about Islam in general and about early Islam in particular? In other words, are there historical lessons to be drawn from our remarks?

To the first of our questions, the answer is fairly simple. The hypostyle mosque became a type that presupposed an idea of a mosque, a collective memory of certain forms best suited to the universal needs of the community. This type was created in the new Muslim cities, primarily in Iraq, rather than in older conquered cities, and its spiritual prototype may have been the house of the Prophet in Madinah. Over the first century of Islam a number of features were added to the type. Few had a strictly religious content and few became compulsory, for there was only one clear need in the mosque, that for a huge space. Most additional developments pertained to an aesthetic or princely and ceremonial ordering of the space. The architectural or decorative terms used in the making of the mosque were never new inventions, and even when certain formal or constructional modifications did occur, they were largely contained within existing pre-Islamic forms. Yet it is almost impossible to confuse a Muslim mosque with a pre-Islamic building, for what changed were not the phonetic or morphemic elements of the building but its syntactical structure. There was no uniformity in the nature of the syntactical change. At times, as in the case of the nave in Damascus or Jerusalem, it was simply that a new direction was given to otherwise known entities. At other times, as in the instances of the mihrab or of the minaret, an older term with a fairly general significance was given a very concrete one. Or a term that had for centuries a fairly precise aesthetic significance in the ordering and composition of an elevation lost that significance and became, as in the case of capitals, merely the constructional element between a column shaft and an arch, a simple redundancy. There were no major constructional changes in the artistic vocabulary of the Mediterranean or the Near East, merely a series of new combinations of existing forms. Only the slow appearance of calligraphy as a major vehicle for aesthetic energies and symbolic meanings is a true novelty of the early Islamic period.

If one turns to the historical lessons that may be drawn from the formation of an art inspired by Islam, three points emerge. First, there were considerable regional variations. These go far beyond such facts as that Iranian mosques used vaulting before Syrian ones or that the lack of large columns in pre-Islamic Spain can explain certain peculiarities of the development of arches. Rather, the qualitative density of an Islam-inspired art varied from area to area. The main and most successful forms were created in Iraq, Syria, and around the Mediterranean; Iran, especially the western part, was least affected, and its monumental growth did not begin before the eleventh century. Throughout, the preeminence of the Fertile Crescent is apparent.
Second, two impetuses underlay the formation of this aspect of Islamic art. One was a reaction to earlier artistic traditions, especially those of Byzantine Christianity; the other was the continuous impact of the Muslim ummah, that is, the continuous presence of a large social body that molded and modeled the forms of its art. It appeared in the community mosque, but also in the peculiarities of the frontier’s ribats and in the cult of holy men.

Third, early Islam seems on the whole to have avoided visual symbols that identified it clearly and precisely. Whether this was a negative result of the power of symbols in Christian art or whether some internal Islamic reason brought it about, the new culture did not endow its novel forms with liturgical or symbolic meanings; or rather it did not compel such meanings on the whole body social. It did not exclude them. Individual mystics and later certain groups did use and understand visual religious symbols, but an ambiguity of meaning remained a permanent characteristic of Islamic forms. One may wonder whether this conclusion cannot be widened to Islamic culture in general, at least at its high orthodox level. Was it not a culture which, in the abstract fullness of its unique divine vision and in the concreteness of its social concerns, never quite succeeded—or consciously refused—to bridge through physical symbols the gap between one God and a good life?

6. Islamic Secular Art: Palace and City

The previous three chapters have considered those early Islamic monuments or attitudes whose functions and forms were directly inspired by the new faith or by the state and civilization derived from it. These monuments and attitudes had a culturally restricted significance and—even though they were not always strictly speaking religious—pietistic and ritual needs, habits, and symbols tended to predominate in their evolution, if not in their creation. Coinage acquired Koranic quotations, the Dome of the Rock became a holy sanctuary, and the mosque grew in liturgical and religious meaning.

But early Islamic art was not limited to such monuments, nor can it be established a priori that the attitudes defined in the fourth chapter affected all aspects of material culture and aesthetic creativity. On the contrary, since the conquest and establishment of Islam were in most cases not accompanied by major destruction, it can be assumed that the vast majority of the needs and activities of life continued “as usual.” The variety of these activities makes it rather difficult to group them all in the same category, but the term “secular” may be used, because clearly religious features (Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian) are automatically excluded. “Secular” should not, however, be understood negatively as whatever is left over. In a positive way, it is an art whose apparent inspiration and purpose are defined in social and individual terms rather than in spiritual or cultural ones. Secular art can be just as restricted as religious art, for a palace is reserved for a prince and only the rich can afford certain objects. The epistemological difference between the two is that there is much more common ground in the functions and inspirations (but not necessarily forms) of secular arts from different cultures than of religious arts. In this aspect of secular art lies its importance for our purposes, for its forms and functions can be imagined as typical of non-Islamic cultures. Therefore, the modifications made in earlier forms by the new culture, if they can be properly identified, are of major importance in defining cultural and aesthetic changes peculiar to Islam. At the same time, it is also possible that the changes are only accidentally preserved in Islamic culture and thus that the value
of the secular arts of Islam extends far beyond the Muslim world itself.

Secular inspiration or meanings have already been mentioned for a number of features in previously discussed monuments and, before proceeding to a systematic study of the theme, we may recall some of these. In coinage the Muslim world failed to adopt an iconography of power that would define its nature in the terms of previous cultures, and it substituted a written statement of its doctrine. As an artistic element, coinage thereby lost some of its significance, for the medium itself makes it rather difficult to decide whether changes in epigraphical style correspond to wider changes in the culture itself. Only very rarely has it been possible, so far, to use coins for the elaboration and solution of Islamic art historical problems as has been done in classical or Byzantine studies. But this may also be the result of insufficient investigations, as has been demonstrated by a few recent studies that have dated and explained through numismatic evidence certain formerly unclear and anonymous stylistic peculiarities.

Then, in the Cordoba mosque the maqsura complex with its elaborate decoration, and perhaps even other parts of the masjid, axial nave, or mihrab, could be interpreted as intrusions of a palace art into a sanctuary. Next to clearly religious mausoleums there were secular ones, the most remarkable being that built in the first half of the tenth century for a Samanid prince at Bukhara with its elaborate, jewelike decoration and formal gateways which do not agree with the main trends of religious architecture (figs. 128, 129). There is a strong possibility of an impact from court art, and even some sanctuaries may have been inspired by such royal mausoleums. Finally, in many instances the decoration of mosques was primarily ornamental, hence much of that decoration would qualify as secular, for, if its formal and significating ties are not with the building in which it is found, it lacks the culturally restricted meaning attributed to religious inspiration.

Much else is known about the secular art of early Islamic times. The main difficulty lies in presenting it in a coherent manner. At the risk of oversimplifying a little and of prejudging some of the conclusions of this chapter, the mass of material is divided according to two subheadings: the art of the court and the art of the city.

A. The Art of the Court

The most celebrated and important documents about an Islamic court art are palaces, which can be divided into two groups. The first is generally associated with the Umayyad dynasty because its best known and best preserved examples were built by Umayyad princes in connection with the agricultural enterprises mentioned earlier. It is known primarily through archaeological sources. The second group is more clearly related to the Abbasid dynasty, although the type is known also in Egypt, Spain, Tunisia, and eastern Iran. Most of its examples are found in cities, large or small. Archaeologically it is a far less well-known group and, imperfectly though they have been excavated, the palaces of Samarra in Iraq and of Madinah al-Zahra in Spain are its best illustrations. On the other hand, much information about these buildings can be derived from literary descriptions and from imperial ceremonies. Because of these differences in the nature of the information we possess, it seems preferable to discuss the two groups separately and then to attempt to tie them together with some considerations on the nature of early Muslim palace architecture.

About twenty early Islamic, primarily agricultural sites in the Fertile Crescent show some evidence of a palace, or at least some sort of more elaborate establishment than simple habitations. Of these the most important are Khirbat Minyah, Qusayr Amrah, Khirbat al-Mafjar, Jabal Says, Qasr al-Hayr West, Qasr al-Hayr East, Mshatta, and Ukhaydir, the latter being the only example found in Iraq rather than in the western half of the Fertile Crescent. One early Islamic palace, in Kufah, is an urban one and will be discussed later. Few of these buildings can be proved to have been constructed by and for the caliphs themselves, and although the inscriptions found on some of them provide the name of a ruling prince they do not usually indicate that the palace was built for him. It is in fact much more likely that we are dealing with an aristocratic architecture rather than with a strictly imperial one. The significance of this point is twofold. Typologically it relates these early Muslim foundations to the Roman tradition of the villa, especially the villa rustica, that country establishment of Roman aristocracy which could reach imperial proportions in Tivoli and Piazza Ar-
merina but which more often than not was merely a sort of elabor-ate farmhouse with physical amenities brought in from the city. Late antiquity and the early Middle Ages continued this Roman tradition, as is known from examples in Tunisia, Anatolia, and Syria, where the celebrated Qasr ibn Wardan is to be so interpreted. Comparatively little is known about the shapes and internal arrangements of these early medieval villas, and the accidental preservation of so many Islamic examples illustrates the character of the type for a much wider area and longer time than the limited area and time of the Muslim foundations. It can of course be recalled that, from a functionally typological point of view, these eight-century examples can be related to Renaissance and Baroque Roman castelli, to northern Italian villas, and to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English or French country residences or châteaux. In all these instances one can identify a number of shared purposes regardless of the immense differences in styles: intermittent rather than permanent full use for living, high level of amenities, few public functions, pleasure rather than power. The latter point is of considerable importance in defining the index of value for historical and even formal purposes of this kind of establishment. Because it was not meant to be used primarily for official state occasions, it reflects private needs and private whims, thus lending itself with greater difficulty to stylistic generalization. Conversely, such features of this art as may be shown to have been repeated systematically can quite securely be taken as characteristic of their time.

Such establishments do not seem to have remained characteristic of the Islamic culture. To my knowledge there is no archaeological or textual information about them from Egypt, the Jazirah, Spain, and Western Iran. In only two regions is the information more complicated. In Transoxiana, especially in the area of Sogd and to a smaller degree in Khorezm, there existed a continuous tradition starting at least as early as the fifth century A.D. of fortified establishments in the country and, in spite of still very incomplete archaeological evidence, it seems that this type of building continued for several centuries, until the tenth or eleventh. At first glance many of these buildings could be considered as nothing more than forts, but their rather elaborate internal composition—at times with a central cupola and formally differentiated halls and rooms around

the domed room—suggests some sort of more official purpose. Furthermore, some of these buildings exhibit a rather novel experimentation with brick vaults which does not seem to fit with purely military architecture. Unfortunately, none of them has been excavated; they do not seem to have been provided with an abundant decoration and it has not been possible so far to adapt known functions to such parts of the buildings as can be differentiated architecturally. But, most important, it does not seem to me that proper criteria have been developed for the dating of many of these monuments. While textual evidence such as Narshakhī’s History of Bukhara does suggest that the landed gentry of Transoxiana—perhaps also of Khorasan—owned and built country estates, the texts do not imply anything similar in size or wealth of decoration to the Umayyad constructions of the Fertile Crescent; thus, without excluding its possibility, the existence of an aristocratic palace architecture in the agricultural countryside of the northeastern Iranian world in early Islamic times is not entirely demonstrated.

The other region is North Africa, especially Tunisia and Algeria. The pertinent archaeological information there is comparatively late for our purposes, for hardly anything exists before the tenth century and the establishment of the Fatimids in Tunisia. At the same time, partly excavated sites such as Mahdiyāh, Mansuriyāh, Ashīr, and the Qal‘ah of the Beni Hammad offer a sufficient number of analogies with earlier establishments in the Fertile Crescent to be of some importance for an understanding of the latter. All North African examples are much larger than their predecessors, and most of them can almost be considered as cities. Yet, cities though they may have been, they were too small to be urban centers and their population was generally minimal. They were official settlements for princes away from the large urban centers and, at least in Tunisia, there is good reason to believe that they had an agricultural function. Even if the latter is not their primary explanation, even if their size and monuments were affected by a series of other developments than those of the early establishments and especially even if they had more of an official and less of a private character, they appear far more clearly than their Central Asian counterparts to be in some sort of succession to the eighth-century foundations in the Fertile Crescent.

Altogether such examples of succession are few, and the Umay-
yad group of monuments in Syria, Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq
form a unified set. In the past they were understood as peculiarly
early Islamic reflections of a taste for a life in the desert, or at least
at the edges of the desert. The Arabic term badiyah was used for
this taste. This explanation has to be abandoned, not only because
the presence of the desert near many of these settlements is sec-
ondary to their existence, but also because the word badiyah never
had the highly romantic meaning given to it by a romantic genera-
tion of investigators. To use the merely economic explanation pro-
posed in the second chapter, that lands were inherited by Muslim
owners on which they built palaces and other monuments, is also
insufficient. For there was no need to build elaborate constructions
in the lands one exploited, and many a latifundium did not possess
such constructions. Another explanation for these establishments
can almost be called one of sanitation, for poets often expressed
distaste for plague-infested cities and their yearning for a free
and unpolluted air, but such statements are mostly literary clichés
and are certainly contradicted by the immense urban effort of early
Islam. Thus, even though a certain degree of simple physical “es-
capism” may have been involved in some instances, like those of
the strange exiled poet-prince al-Walid ibn Yazid, some other ex-
planation must be provided.

It is perhaps not an accident that the largest number of such es-
establishments is found in Syria and Palestine, the region with the
smallest immediate islamization of earlier urban centers. Far longer
than other provinces it remained predominantly non-Muslim, even
though the empire’s capital was there. It is then quite understand-
able that Muslim princes might have felt more at ease in the less
populated countryside in expressing their newly acquired wealth
and way of life. It is also possible that more examples than we know
had remained of rich Roman villas, but this point is rather debat-
able. Finally, it is likely that, since at this time the power of what
had been called the “Arab kingdom” was very much dependent on
nomadic, half-nomadic, or newly sedentary tribes, the countryside
seemed to be a better meeting ground between the princes and the
great tribal chieftains with their huge retinues than the cities, no-
toriously wary of and inhospitable to nomads. When the sources
of power came to be located in the cities and in a professional mer-
cenary army—as happened from the latter part of the eighth cen-
tury onward—such country establishments lost their raison d’être.

The ultimate explanation for the phenomenon probably lies in
some sort of combination of all these possible causes. The signifi-
cant point—and the main reason for these details in trying to ex-
plain the existence of Umayyad villas or castles—is that, however
fascinating they may be individually, these monuments have only
a limited historical importance in the formation of an Islamic art.
They were not in the mainstream of the culture’s development.
Probably for this reason no memory of these palaces has remained
in medieval chronicles, except in the very faint way that Umayyad
princes spent a lot of money for buildings. But, if their historical
importance is limited, they provide considerable information in two
other areas. One is that of pre-Islamic art, for we have here a large
body of monuments whose forms had to have been taken or ad-
apted from something earlier; the other is cultural, for, even
without textual sources, the comparatively large number of pre-
served examples suggests something about the setting and taste
early Muslim aristocrats sought to create for their way of life and
thus perhaps something of importance can be said about the life
itself.

In turning to the monuments themselves, we shall first try to
identify those features that seem to be common to all of them, in
other words to define the type from which any one of them was
a variant. Except in points of detail the variants as such will not be
discussed. A typological definition can be made from considera-
tions of internal functions, construction, and decoration.

Three functions appear in almost all early Islamic palaces. The
first one is a mosque, which occurs in one of two ways. In Khirbat
al-Mafjar (fig. 60), Jabal Says, or Qasar al-Hayr West, as well as in
a number of smaller sites in Transjordan, it is a separate building,
usually a miniaturized hypostyle. At Mafjar such a building is
roughly part of the general planning of the establishment’s units,
but it is still a separate entity with one door leading outside and a
smaller one connecting the mosque with the main place of habita-
tion. In other palaces, Khirbat Minyah (fig. 58), Ukhaydir (fig. 63),
or Mshatta (fig. 62), the mosque is included in the composition of
a single building and forms one of its component units, at times, as
at Ukhaydir, a fairly elaborate one. Only at Mafjar do we encoun-
ter both types of mosques. When it is an integral part of the build-
ing it may also be a modified hypostyle, but the hypostyle is not automatic and the mosque can be simply a hall. All these mosques have a mihrab but none of the other additions to a religious building, a possible exception being the large square tower base excavated by the qiblah wall of the smaller Mafjar mosque. It could have been a minaret, although there is something odd about the presence of a minaret in what was a private internal mosque and its absence near the public one.

There is nothing particularly surprising about the existence of mosques in country estates. We meet here with a Muslim adaptation of the characteristic feature of a palace chapel or sanctuary. Just as in European aristocratic architecture of a later time, the chapel is near the entrance, so that the retinue that does not necessarily live with the prince can participate in the religious service. It is likely that Islam picked up the idea of such “chapels” from pre-Islamic architecture, but I do not know of a single example of such institutions in early medieval villas. More important, the automatic presence of small mosques in country palaces is a further indication of the growing piety of the mosque’s meaning. These estates certainly did not require an architectural form for the expression of the collective will of the Muslim group, since most of the cultivators were still Christian. An alternate explanation is that the presence of the mosque identified the local owner as belonging to a different entity than the majority of the population and, as will be shown more systematically in the conclusion, both aspects were certainly involved.

The second function appearing in all these estates may be called a residential one. The term must be understood rather widely, for it also includes official functions, but for practical purposes it makes sense to put the two together, for they were usually planned alongside of each other. The main residential and official unit was a square building, generally some seventy meters to a side (fig. 61). On the outside it appeared to be a fortress with heavy, almost always round, corner towers, a varying number of half-towers on each side, and a single entrance. But the fortified look was only that; it hardly corresponded to any military function. The towers were full of rubble and, when not, served as latrines. The façades were frequently decorated or modified in some other fashion. At Mafjar the presence of a forecourt in front of the residential unit led to the transformation of the façade into a two-storied portico framing a high gateway. At Qasr al-Hayr West (fig. 65) the whole wall was covered with an elaborate composition of stucco sculptures, and at Mshatta (figs. 120ff.) the celebrated series of triangles with stone carvings gives anything but an impression of defense.

The interior arrangements of the residential building were of two kinds. By far the most common one consisted of a central courtyard surrounded by a portico and of rooms arranged along the walls. In almost all instances there were two floors. The precise pre-Islamic history of this type is still very obscure, but its formal prototype seems most likely to be found in the late antique and early Byzantine forts erected all over Syria and Transjordan. More problematic is the fact that none of the pertinent examples were really palaces, except the so-called palace of the Dux Ripae at Dura-Europos which is earlier than the mid-third century a.d. But perhaps this is merely a matter of insufficient exploration of the Syrian countryside.

The second type of internal arrangement is known through only two monuments, but they are major ones indeed: Mshatta and Ukhaydir (figs. 62, 63). Here the fortified enclosure was subdivided into smaller, apparently self-sufficient, units. In Mshatta the central part remains as a primarily formal unit, while the two sides thirds were provided with smaller units of habitation, if one is to judge from the position of bonds in the inner face of the wall. Unfortunately Mshatta was never finished, and the several rather fancy reconstructions which have been proposed are based on very uncertain evidence. Ukhaydir, on the other hand, is quite well preserved. There we find a whole palace as a separate entity within a wider enclosure. The palace was subdivided into individual units arranged around courtyards, with a central unit given particular prominence. Although the entrance has several floors, the rest of the building, like Mshatta, had one story only. There is no clear parallel for the internal composition of Mshatta and Ukhaydir in Mediterranean architecture, but prototypes do exist in Sassanian Iran, as in palaces like Firuzabad and Qasr-i Shirin. It is thus possible and perhaps simplest to consider this second type of arrangement as Iranian in origin, the first example seen so far of a major impact from the non-Mediterranean part of Islam. At the same time it is important to note that Mshatta and Ukhaydir are the latest in date of the series of monuments we are examining, and one may wonder whether
the greater complexity of the plan indicates simply the influence of a different tradition or a growth in the complexity of functional needs that would have led to a search for or discovery of new models. The problem, in other words, is whether in this particular instance a formal distinction should be explained in terms of regional formal influences or in terms of willed needs within the culture itself.

Within each palace certain architectural units stand out clearly enough to be identifiable functionally: gate, reception hall, living places. The entrances were all fairly elaborate compositions, which can be divided into three groups. A first one, found for instance at Khirbat Minyah, consists of a projecting hall, covered by a large cupola, that leads into a long hall (fig. 58). A second and more common one had one or two long halls with side benches; at Khirbat al-Mafjar this was a particularly heavily decorated area of the palace (fig. 60). The third group, which may be called complex or composite, occurs in the later palaces of Ukhaydir and of Mshatta. There a whole entrance complex was created consisting of long halls, domed rooms, and a variety of attendant halls; in both the mosque was attached to the complex. What is important about these entrances is, first, that only one function can be clearly suggested for the gate. It was a place of waiting, and numerous texts tell of individuals waiting by a palace gate for some princely favor. There is no evidence for princely ceremonies at the gate, which thus served primarily as a physical protection for the personage inhabiting the palace. An evolution seems to be visible from the early Khirbat Minyah with a simple entrance to the elaborate complex of Ukhaydir. It is, however, uncertain whether it is entirely proper to deduce a growing separation between a prince and his clients that for the culture as a whole, or whether the two buildings simply reflect the varying needs and taste of two different owners. Second, the entrances have obvious prototypes in a long tradition of gateways all over the Near East and the Mediterranean. An additional curious aspect of the early Islamic gate is illustrated by a recent discovery at Qasr al-Hayr East (fig. 69). Three gates are known in the huge, 17-kilometers-long wall of the site’s outer enclosure, one of which is of the domical type found at Khirbat Minyah and possesses a very similar decoration of niches and sculpted stones. None of these gates led to buildings, and the most impressive one was found nearly a mile from any trace of life. This suggests that, whatever its formal origins, the gate existed as a separate unit, as an independent element in the vocabulary of early Islamic shapes.

The problem of the official reception hall or throne room is more complicated. It can be assumed that every establishment had some sort of formal room; in most early texts these are called maṣlis, formal “sitting rooms,” although later other terms, divan or iwan, occur as well. Whatever its name, there was a need for a prince or wealthy owner to receive guests and visitors in some official manner, a practice for which ample evidence exists both in pre-Islamic imperial ceremonies and in traditional Arab mores. Arabic historical literature and particularly the special genre of anecdotes surrounding the lives of poets—most of whom were attached to individual princes—has actually preserved a number of instances of the very type of ceremony that can be associated with country estates. These were not great receptions of foreign ambassadors, but visits of tribal chieftains, plaintiffs, and especially poets, all of whom expected by right or wit to obtain some money or some favor. The prince usually sat at one end of the maṣlis on a large bench-like throne to which he may have invited some honored guest. There was no organized ceremony of arrival and departure, and the prince’s clothing was generally informal, although some Umayyad princes already liked initially to have a curtain drawn between themselves and their audience. A fairly large crowd was usually present and the proceedings were somewhat casual, with a chamberlain or ḥājib as a sort of master of ceremonies. Often a meal and occasionally a drink were shared by some of the participants. The problem is to find in excavated palaces a setting for this sort of affair.

Whenever, as at Qasr al-Hayr West and Khirbat al-Mafjar, there was a second floor, the reception hall was on it, right over the entrance, with a window on the outside for light (figs. 60, 65, 68). When only one floor was present, the audience room or rooms were either on one side of the porticoed courtyard as at Khirbat Minyah (fig. 58) or formed elaborate complexes as at Mshatta or Ukhaydir (figs. 70, 63). The forms given to these rooms were remarkably traditional. For the most part they were basilical halls with three naves leading to an apse, an elaborate triple apse at Mshatta, where presumably the throne was found. In Ukhaydir the basilical hall is
replaced by an iwan on a court, followed by a square domed room
which in turn opened into a series of porticoed courts. The features
in Ukhaydir have characteristically Iranian prototypes, and it can
be suggested that the position of Mshatta’s basilical hall opening
directly onto the court reflects an eastern influence as well. In most
instances side rooms are found near the apse, probably for the
changes of clothes that preceded certain receptions or for whatever
implements, money, gifts, food, might be required for the cere-
mony.

Not one of these formal elements is original with Islam, and so
far it has not been possible to detect an architectural change that
could be attributed to specifically Muslim ceremonial purposes. The
only exception is the rather awkward one of Khirbat Minyaha,
where the presumed reception hall consisted of a basilical hall with-
out apse but where a heavily decorated hall with a pair of smaller
rooms on either side appears right next to the basilical hall. It was
probably a misunderstanding of a borrowed form, whose sole sig-
nificance would be that the Muslim architectural planner under-
stood the combination basilical hall–apse as a form that could be
broken into smaller units. In general, architectural forms were
taken from traditions issued from the Roman empire because they
had been associated with a formal architecture of princes, even
though nowhere do we find evidence for an elaborateness of cere-
monies comparable to what is known in Byzantium or in Sassanian
Iran. It is possible that this lack of correspondence between official
forms and official ceremonies was already a feature of the art of
country estates from Rome onward, but the main point is that of
the new culture’s complete takeover of an older formal vocabulary
for reception halls.

A methodological problem occurs when we turn to living units
within residential ensembles, for we have no absolutely certain
knowledge of the purposes to which parts of the palaces other than
reception halls and entrances were put. The evidence is clearest at
Qasr al-Hayr West and at Ukhaydir (figs. 61, 63). In both in-
stances a repeated grouping of rooms forms separate, apartment-
like units. In the Syrian example one long hall is flanked by three
rooms on each side, and one of the towers along the wall contains
a latrine. In Ukhaydir a courtyard is provided with a group of
rooms on two sides; each group consists of one regular or modified

iever flanked by rooms with narrower entrances. It has been pro-
posed that these self-contained units, definable as comprising one
central room or hall and a number of secondary ones, be called
hayts, the Arabic term for houses, and that they be considered as
the characteristic living entities of the early Islamic country estate.
Barring new evidence this interpretation seems acceptable, and only
two additional comments may be made.

The first one concerns the sort of life that can be imagined in
these buildings. Literary evidence so far has not provided any sig-
nificant information, and it is quite difficult to translate architec-
tural forms into life without the help of texts. Should we see these
units as demonstrating that the inhabitants of the palaces were di-
vided into equal family units? Were these guest rooms or apart-
ments? No archaeological differentiation exists between rooms and
it is thus impossible to decide on more precise functions, to differ-
entiate between places for cooking, eating, sleeping, or even some
kind of work. Although archaeological information is far from
complete or satisfactory, the rather odd conclusion emerges that
a magnificent formal architecture was created without any visible
differentiation in the setting of daily life. Was this really so and
should we see most of these rooms as barely organized shelters to
which a still partly nomadic population brought rugs, pots, and
bundles? The consequences for cultural history would be impor-
tant. Or else have many of these buildings been improperly exca-
vated or published?

The second point is that the hayt arrangement of whatever kind
is not characteristic of all palaces. At Khirbat al-Mafjar (fig. 60)
single long halls are found, divided into halves and occasionally
communicating with each other. A combination of the single hall
and of the hayt occurs at Jabal Says. It is possible that these varia-
tions are the result of individual circumstances at each establish-
ment, but the main point would remain that the hayt arrangement
was not the only kind, merely the prevalent one.

It is equally difficult to explain the formal origins of these living
arrangements. Imperial Roman villas had a far clearer functional
differentiation of forms, but it is not clear how much of this was
carried down to the simpler houses and villas of the provinces. Mili-
tary buildings did not differentiate between halls, but then the
functions of the latter were probably more consistently the same
than in villas. None of these earlier arrangements in the Mediterranean are obvious prototypes for the early Islamic bays, but Sassanian palace architecture was already provided with similar compositions which are as unexplained.

A number of rooms have architecturally identifiable features that distinguish them from the rest. Such are the large room on the north side or the main western one over an underground cool room with a pool, both at Khirbat al-Mafjar, but none of the interpretations proposed for these rooms is particularly convincing. Thus we are faced with the further peculiarity that architectural differentiation in living areas is not clear enough to be understood.

The general impression given by the main living entity of the early Muslim palace is curiously paradoxical: a fortified aspect without military possibilities (fig. 67), interior differentiation limited to audience halls and entrances, an apparently very limited amount of living comfort, almost total lack of formal or informal internal architectural details such as doors and windows. There are several ways of explaining this series of paradoxes. One is primarily cultural with important art historical ramifications. These palaces were instances of the adaptation of a new way of life to an existing vocabulary of forms. The entire typology of at least the early palaces was pre-Islamic, and the awkwardness of certain compositions or our inability to give a precise meaning to each part would be the results of a series of forms that were not fully adapted to the functions for which they were used. An explanation of the forms becomes then a problem of pre-Islamic, mostly Mediterranean, art and culture. An argument in favor of this interpretation is the rapid abandonment of this type of early Islamic building, which obviously did not correspond to the mainstream of Islamic needs. Information about life in these palaces has come from literary sources, and as it can be reconstructed from episodes found in chronicles or from the lives of poets, it was a rather disorganized life in all but a few major ceremonies. Almost any setting could harbor the peripatetic life of the Umayyad prince.

A second explanation is primarily art historical with significant cultural consequences. The circumstances of the conquest led to the development of estates owned by a nouveau riche aristocracy of Arabian descent. As some of these princes decided to live permanently or sporadically in their estates, they sought in existing archi-

tectural practices such forms as best expressed their own needs and purposes. Thus the military exterior was adopted because it was the most common symbol of power; audience halls were taken as such from earlier units because the reception was a major Arabian ceremony; living places were simple shelters because the society's mores did not require elaborate bedrooms or dining rooms; kitch- ens were absent because food was prepared outside and brought in, in the manner of Bedouins today. Compositional awkwardnesses reflect a lack of interest in architectural planning as well as a lack of prototypes. The peculiarly unsystematic planning of an early building like Khirbat Minyah and the far more thoughtful organization of Mshatta or Ukhaydir illustrate the growth of a concern for planning, the slow achievement of an early Muslim type of building. Altogether the many examples of palaces can serve as examples of an architecture in the making, of a series of adaptations of older forms chosen for new purposes, at times, as in the Syrian bayt, even with original inventions. The type that was eventually created did not survive because, as has been mentioned, its ecologi- cal purpose disappeared. With this explanation the importance of these palaces for pre-Islamic architecture disappears, since it is only fragments from older traditions which they adopted and recom- posed. On the other hand, their significance for early Islamic cul- ture and in a way for a general theory of the arts is considerable, for one can observe how a new culture picked and organized units from a variety of spatial and functional origins in order to express its own needs.

It is not yet possible to choose between these two explanations. Monographic analyses of individual architectural motifs are still necessary, as well as further textual investigations of the life of the Umayyads. Some useful ideas may also be provided by ethnographic studies of comparable changes in the quality of life character- istic of contemporary Arabia. Finally, one may have to consider a more thorough elaboration of the theoretical problem in- volved, that of the manner in which a human entity—the new aristocratic landed gentry with more or less definable habits of life—finds its own physical setting out of the architectural vocabulary created for a very different social and cultural entity.

Next to mosques and living or formal units, the most common feature of early Muslim estates was the bath. Baths are known at
Qasr al-Hayr West, Jabal Says, and Khirbat al-Mafjar. A small bath was seen near Khirbat Minyah, and a large one has just been discovered at Qasr al-Hayr East (fig. 74). Several baths are independent of any major living unit. Such is the celebrated Quasayr Amrah (fig. 59), located in a secluded part of the Transjordanian steppe. In reality it can be connected with a number of constructions farther away which indicate that the area itself was used as an estate, but it is rather remarkable that only the bath acquired a monumental form and, at least here, a celebrated painted decoration. No baths were known until recently at Mshatta or Ukhaydir. Had the former been completed it would certainly have had one; as to the latter, a bath was discovered near its mosque during excavations carried out in 1965.

All these baths belong typologically to the same series. Their heating systems, hot rooms, and service areas directly continued a Roman tradition of baths, especially of a smaller type commonly found in Syria (fig. 74). The only modification was that the tepidarium or warm room tended to disappear. Yet in most of these baths the actual bathing area occupied only a small part of the building. Most of the space consisted of a single large hall, whose shape varied considerably from site to site. At Qasr al-Hayr West it was a simple rectangular room. At Qasr al-Hayr East a rectangular porticoed court was provided at one end with two marble-lined pools filled from high in the wall by two fountains (fig. 73). Between the pools a formal gate led to a long hall with a painted decoration, before the bathing area proper. At Quasayr Amrah a small basilical hall ended in a squared apse framed by two small rooms. At Jabal Says a modified version of the same type occurred. The most impressive area was at Khirbat al-Mafjar (fig. 72). There a huge hall of twenty-five square units was covered with a central cupola and then two series of vaults around the dome; the hall was provided with a large pool at one end, with a formal domed entrance, and with a small private room and apse in its southwestern corner (fig. 75). All parts of the hall were heavily decorated with mosaics, paintings, and carved stuccoes.

If we except the purely technical problems of heating rooms, spreading heat through the building, and distributing water, two questions are posed by the existence of these baths. Why were they so frequently found as major monuments in Umayyad foundations, and what is the significance and function of the hall attached to the bathing area proper?

There is no great difficulty in answering the first question. The bath was a characteristic function of classical urban culture and would remain a typical feature of medieval Islamic culture, but not of the Christian world. In both cultures it was not only a matter of personal cleanliness—tied in Islam with the practice of ritual ablutions—but also of social organization and habits. The bath served as a meeting place for relaxation and communication; it would be interesting some day to collect available literary data about the uses of the bath in the Middle Ages and about its importance in the transmission of oral literature and in the formation of social movements. Already in Roman times the urban bath was transferred to the country villa, to which it introduced the amenities of urban living, a process that finds an interesting parallel in the suburban and exurban developments of our own time. This function of providing country establishments with luxurious life can also be assumed for the Umayyads. The only problem is whether the early Muslim phenomenon should be considered as a more or less conscious revival of the classical practice, or whether because of the Muslim examples we can assume that the Christian world of the preceding centuries had continued the Roman practice. Unfortunately we are far less informed about Byzantine country estates than about later and earlier ones, but it is interesting to note that in the admittedly limited area of northern Syria which has been studied exhaustively the bath hardly plays a role at all. Whether continuance or revival of earlier ways, the urban origin of the Umayyad bath would find confirmation in the fact that all investigators of both techniques and internal arrangements have seen in the country examples the transition between classical Roman and medieval Islamic city types.

If then the fact of the bath's existence does not pose a particular problem and if its technical features are sufficiently clear in a historical perspective, what was the function of the large hall attached to the bath but not directly used for bathing? Such a large hall could be considered as an apodyterium or dressing room, but it is not very likely that this was its only function. It often had complicated shapes and much decoration, and at Qasr al-Hayr East another room, right by the entrance, can be identified as being the
dressing room. Then it has been noted by many investigators that a series of Syrian baths, at Dura-Europos, Brad, and Serjilla, whose technical characteristics are quite close to the Umayyad ones, were provided with particularly large halls, proportionately much larger than the apodyterium of the classical bath. It had been suggested that these served as meeting places, but these are all city baths and one may wonder what sort of social purpose our country baths could have. It is also unlikely that they were vestigial forms taken over without a clear function attached to them, because of the obvious care given to their organization and decoration.

The remarkable feature of these halls is that they were so different from each other: a basilical hall that could look almost like a church at Qusayr Amrah, a large court with a portico and two marble-lined pools and fountains at Qasr al-Hayr East, a large hall with a complex vaulted structure, a big but shallow pool, and a uniquely rich decoration at Khirbat al-Mafjar. This variety suggests that the halls’ function or functions were not provided for in the architectural vocabulary from which Islamic builders borrowed their terms. Textual information about Umayyad ceremonies and ways of life may provide an answer. A number of accounts indicate that next to the formal majlis for receptions there was also a majlis al-lahwah, a place for entertainment and pleasure. The main activities were drinking, singing, listening to poetry recitals, watching dancers, and listening to musicians; meals were occasionally involved as well. At times there was a slightly orgiastic quality to these ceremonies. At other times they were merely eccentric, as when the future al-Walid II had a curtain drawn across a pool filled with wine and jumped in after each song performed by a singer on the other side of the curtain; if the singer was good, he or she was invited to join the prince in the swimming pool. But it would be wrong to interpret some of these practices only as a simple form of licentious behavior on the part of an aristocracy that had recently acquired an immense wealth. In reality they had a formal, semi-official character. Abd al-Malik, a very straightforward ruler, appeared occasionally on a throne holding a cup of wine and surrounded by two girls. The sober and miserly Hisham occasionally got drunk right after going to Friday prayers. At one performance for al-Walid II, actors arrived dressed as stars and planets and seem to have performed a sort of cosmic dance. Many other stories and accounts could be gathered to indicate that Umayyad princes adopted as their own an ancient Near Eastern tradition of transforming pastime and pleasure into a formal activity illustrating the power and the greatness of the prince.

By the time of the Muslim conquest this tradition was primarily associated with the Sassanian dynasty of Iran, and whatever impact it may have had in Rome had been played down, if not entirely given up, in official Byzantine ceremonies. One can only speculate as to why the Muslims did not adopt the complex processions, appearances, and acclamations of the Christian empire, whereas they picked up quite rapidly the Iranian ceremonial system of a static prince appearing in majesty or of pastimes as identifying royalty. It can be argued with some justification that in the formation of a Muslim empire, in the development of what medieval writers called mulk, “princehood” or “kingship,” ancient oriental traditions unfettered by the possible disapproval of the church took precedence, as much as the whole Persian empire had been conquered. It is possible also that a number of the ceremonial themes—feasting, drinking, music or poetry, and also hunting—corresponded to habits of pleasure and pastime in traditional Arab society and thus that their adoption was easy. Some evidence for this interpretation can be found in a certain lack of seriousness, a playfulness that permeates some of the accounts of the ceremonial lahawah of Umayyad princes. Finally, in line with an argument that has been one of our leitmotifs, it may be that early Muslim princes quite consciously rejected those ceremonial practices that had been too closely identified with the Byzantine emperor.

Whatever cause or combination of causes may eventually explain the appearance of this particular type of ceremony in early Islam, its existence is certain, and I would like to suggest that the main function of the group of elaborate halls associated with baths was that of a majlis al-lahwah, a pleasure hall comparable to the ballrooms of the aristocratic architecture of another age. Its association with the bath need not be surprising for it belonged to that type of luxury from elsewhere which characterizes the bath in the country as well. This association was possibly only occasional, since some baths do not have such rooms and some palaces may have had them elsewhere in their arrangement, perhaps on the roof.

Many aspects of the decoration of these palaces confirm the pro-
posed interpretation, but it is first necessary to consider the shape
given to these halls. In a way each building poses its own problem.
At Qusayr Amrah (fig. 59) the use of a shrunken tripartite basilical
hall with apse and side rooms possibly indicates that the hall was
also used for formal receptions, but it primarily suggests that the
basilical form was a sort of passe partout form without clear func-
tion attached to it. At Qasr al-Hayr East the full information is not
available yet, and there is no need to speculate at this stage. The
most puzzling instance is that of Khirbat al-Mafjar (figs. 60, 72),
for until now no appropriate prototype has been found for the form
and elevation of the bath’s main hall. Could it have been an inven-
tion of the architects working for the Umayyads? If so, we would
have here a fascinating occurrence of a new form specifically cre-
ated for a new function. The point could be pushed a step further.
While the general shape of the building indicates a centrally
planned construction, with the cupola in the middle as the unit
around which the rest of the building rotates, several other features
suggest other axes as well. The elaborate gateway and the unique
mosaic unit in the central exedra on the west side of the hall indicate
a longitudinal axis similar to that of a basilical reception hall. The
pool on the south side, the close proximity to latrines, to the bath-
ing part of the establishment, and to the small heavily decorated
room in the northwestern corner (fig. 75), all suggest a sort of hall-
way, an elaborate vestibule used for a variety of purposes, many
of which were simply movement and communication. Finally, the
small northwestern room and the southwestern door which through
a passageway leads directly to the living unit indicate the private
quality of the bath hall.

One can argue, then, that the form of the building was developed
for its flexibility and that, as with the hypostyle mosque, individual
elements of known Mediterranean background—exedrae, heavy
piers, central cupola—were recomposed to accommodate a variety
of purposes. Eventually each of the variety of functions the
bath fulfilled acquired its own characteristic form and the Mafjar
shape appears to be unique because it was created before each
function had acquired its own form. At this stage, however, we
may be moving too far ahead of our information, for private palace
or royal bath architecture is very badly known in later or earlier
times. Perhaps it is simpler to suggest that the Mafjar hall is merely

the only example left of an architectural form that was fairly com-
mon in pre-Islamic secular architecture, in palaces or baths.

One last unique feature of Khirbat al-Mafjar, the pool in the
forecourt (fig. 76), poses a similar problem. Its superstructure con-
sisting of an octagonal arcade around a square covered by a dome
and a balustrade has no immediately known parallels but almost
certainly reflects a classical tradition of ciborium-like pavilions in
gardens. Once again early Islamic evidence illustrates a lost secular
architecture from earlier times. But one cannot totally rule out an
Umayyad invention.

Just as in the case of religious architecture, the vast majority of
the structural and technical features of these palaces show little
novelty and seem to continue, with few modifications, earlier tra-
ditions of Syria and Palestine or, in the instances of Ukhaydir, of
Iraq. Furthermore, the fact that almost all of them are found in
ruins (figs. 67, 70) renders many conclusions about construction,
especially in superstructures, somewhat uncertain. A few remarks
may suffice. Iranian or at least Iraqi techniques of brick construc-
tion were introduced into the western half of the Fertile Crescent,
and Mshatta (fig. 70) is the best known example of this phenome-
non which is visible in less obvious details elsewhere. Historically
it illustrates the new balance between regions achieved by the Mus-
lim world, but its real importance is in the fact that the secular
architecture of Umayyad princes exhibits this balance much better
than the architecture of the early mosque. Next, vaulting played a
far more important part in secular than in religious architecture;
thus from the very beginning there appears the preponderance of
secular functions in the development of vaulting that remained
characteristic of much of medieval Islamic art. Finally, Umayyad
estates brought to light much information about secondary archi-
tectural features such as balustrades, windows, doorways, and the
like. At Khirbat al-Mafjar and at Qasr al-Hayr East and West, frag-
ments of stained glass windows as well as numerous examples of
tracery work were found (fig. 77). Much of the latter was done in
stucco, and most of it is not found in pre-Islamic Mediterranean
architecture. Whether all of it should be considered as an early Is-
lamic invention, as an importation from the east (perhaps from as
far as Central Asia where some similar remains have been found),
or whether once again Umayyad evidence should be used to recon-
struct an earlier architecture, are all so far unanswered questions. A side aspect of these archaeological finds is the commonness of stucco as the means by which a building’s effect was given; walls, columns, capitals, and balustrades were covered in a way that was not in the mainstream of the Mediterranean architectural tradition. We shall return to further implications of this point in our next chapter.

The decoration of these country establishments has been, since the first discovery of Qusayr Amrah, their most extraordinary and best known feature. Three techniques are represented: mosaics, painting, and sculpture. The most remarkable examples of mosaics, known almost exclusively as floor mosaics, are at Khirbat Minyah (fig. 78) and Khirbat al-Mafjar. There is nothing original about the technique as such, which belongs to the standard system of building decoration all over the Mediterranean. Painting (figs. 87, 88) is equally common, not only in former classical lands but also in Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia. There is no way of determining at this time whether any changes occurred in the technique itself, which is represented in almost all Umayyad monuments, with Qusayr Amrah and Qasr al-Hayr West having the best-preserved examples. Sculpture (figs. 79–86) is more problematic. Occurring in all sites, most of it is stucco sculpture wherein lies its first peculiarity, for, while stucco sculpture was not unknown in pre-Islamic Syria and Palestine, it was not as common as it became in the eighth century. Before Islam, stucco sculpture was characteristic of the art of Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia, and thus a significant shift took place in the decorative techniques of an area. It is less clear, however, whether stucco was used because of an impact of the East or simply because it was a cheap technique that could rapidly transform the visible aspect of a building. Another peculiarity of this sculpture is that it includes both relief sculpture (figs. 118–23) and a sculpture in the round or at least in very high relief (figs. 79–86). The latter is often a sculpture of various human and animal forms and therein lies its most outstanding peculiarity. For a monumental sculpture had just about disappeared from the whole Mediterranean and Near East in the centuries preceding the birth of Islam, even though all areas had earlier had a major monumental sculpture. It is as though the Islamic world of Syria deliberately revived an antique technique that had been given up for several centuries. It can indeed be ar-

gued that this revival was conscious, for, as already mentioned, the Muslim world did not feel bound to continue automatically the techniques of the immediately preceding generations, and it could easily see that an art of monumental sculpture had been one of the main decorative techniques of more ancient times. Its best examples were uncovered at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Qasr al-Hayr West, and Mshatta. Sculpture in the round did not survive the Umayyad period as a major artistic technique, and it is only through an occasional text that its existence in the ninth and tenth centuries is known.

One last point about the techniques deserves mention: practically all our information comes from Syria and Palestine. Ukhaydir has very little decoration of the sort found in the west and utilizes either simply molded stucco or a technique destined to be of tremendous importance in later Islamic times, the articulation of brick, the medium of construction, for decorative effects. But even the latter is used sparingly and, however dangerous it may be to use a single preserved example, it would appear that, as we shall see later, Iraq did not develop decorative techniques in its country estates to the same extent as Syria.

Turning to the subject matter of the decoration, the immense variety of available themes is at first glance quite overwhelming. Some of the monuments look like enormous bric-a-brac of motifs and themes whose actual signifying precision is difficult to determine. One wonders whether at times the artists and patrons of Qusayr Amrah, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Qasr al-Hayr West did not simply accumulate masses of subjects and transfer them onto the walls of their buildings without worrying too much about the concrete meaning of any one of them. This original impression is all the more striking when the decoration is compared as a whole not only to the iconographic precision of Christian or Buddhist religious decoration but also to the organized systems of Roman, Byzantine, and even Sassanian imperial art. The key question is whether this impression is valid and whether the decoration of these palaces does indeed have an iconographic ambiguity, an ambivalence of meaning, or whether we are simply not yet able to understand the structure of the visual language utilized by early Muslim princes because the private meaning of the language was greater than the public one.
The difficulty is compounded by the astounding variety of the stylistic origins of this architectural decoration. At Qusayr Amrah the astronomical ceiling in the domed room and a number of personifications in the main hall are directly taken from classical Roman art, the representation of the prince in the apse copies a Byzantine model, while the half-naked women standing in front of a curtain behind which other faces appear are Iranian in background, if not even Indian (fig. 87). At Qasr al-Hayr West, a sculpture imitating a Palmyrene relief (fig. 79) occurs together with sculptures of princes copying both Byzantine (fig. 80) and Sassanian models; of two large floor paintings one is purely "classical" (fig. 88), while the other is adapted from Sassanian models; some unpublished fragments recall demonic faces from Central Asian Buddhist art. At Khirbat al-Mafjar, the very Mediterranean classical mosaic floors contain one celebrated panel of Oriental origin; the statue of a prince is Sassanian (fig. 81), while the almost life-size statues of male and female personages with their peculiar hairdo and their bouquets of flowers (figs. 82, 83) have their closest parallels in Central Asian sculpture. It would be easy to multiply examples illustrating a sort of stylistic Esperanto that makes a systematic analysis of subjects particularly difficult. Either the patrons had a precise program—and then one may wonder at their fantastic visual versatility in understanding a message sent in so many different stylistic codes—or else the messages were secondary to the accumulated effect of a mass of themes from different origins.

In spite of these queries and uncertainties, it is possible to distinguish a number of iconographic threads in the decoration of Umayyad palaces. First, much of it is exclusively ornamental, with no other value than that of enhancing the architecture on which it is put; it is this kind that will emerge as almost the sole decoration at Mshatta (figs. 120–23) and, because of its importance in Islamic art in general, its study is deferred to the last chapter. All geometric and vegetal designs belong to the category of ornament.

Problems occur when animal and especially human themes occur in their midst. For instance, a well-known panel at Khirbat al-Mafjar shows interlaced roundels filled with diversified human busts (figs. 85, 86); there is some uncertainty as to whether these may not have had a concrete iconographic meaning. Hypothetically,
as long as such meanings have not been found, it is preferable to consider this type of motif as ornamental.

A second theme, most easily recognizable in all buildings, is the princely cycle (figs. 3, 80–89). It consists of a number of representations of princes, always in either imperial Byzantine or Sassanian garb, thus indicating a clear consciousness on the part of the early Muslims of which artistic traditions were truly imperial. But, especially in the case of Sassanian imitations in Khirbat al-Mafjar and in Qasr al-Hayr, the costumes of princes vary and do not correspond either to the last Sassanian practice or to Arab usage. It was thus through images generally identified as Sassanian or Byzantine that the theme reached Umayyad art. Besides representations of the prince, we meet with illustrations of the pastimes discussed in dealing with the architecture of the buildings: hunting, dancing, music-making, nude or half-clad women, games, acrobatics, gift-bearing, are themes found in all three major buildings. In almost all instances the origins of these themes are Iranian, and so we have here the first examples of the princely cycle which became the main subject matter of so much of later Islamic art.

The princely cycle of Umayyad art had not yet acquired the abstract and standardized quality it would have later but maintained a concrete character, as though some very precise local events were involved. This appears, for instance, in a painting at Qusayr Amrah (fig. 89) showing a tall nude woman standing by a pool surrounded by a portico, not unlike the pool at Khirbat al-Mafjar. The image may be understood as a generalized one of a handsome woman normally found in the entourage of the prince, but the personage standing to the side and the precision of the architectural setting seem to indicate a precise reference to some event, perhaps one of those semi-orgiastic pageants described in texts. Both at Qusayr Amrah and at Qasr al-Hayr West the hunting scenes possess concrete details that may have had a specific, local connation. In several sculpted ensembles at Khirbat al-Mafjar variations in the detailed treatment of otherwise repeated subjects can be explained in the same way. Altogether, most Umayyad princely themes lack the stereotyped quality of the cycle in later Islamic art and, while the theme itself became a cliché, its Umayyad forms were not often repeated.
Besides the princely cycle with its idiosyncrasies, it is almost impossible to establish clear iconographic groups. There were certainly erotic, perhaps even pornographic, images at Qusayr Amrah. Astronomical themes are clear at Qusayr Amrah and possible in some of the stucco ensembles found at Khirbat al-Mafjar. For the rest we are still in the dark, and it does not seem to me that any clear explanation exists for the almost life-size horsemen at Qasr al-Hayr West, for the panels showing various activities at Qasr Amrah, or for most of the bestiary of Khirbat al-Mafjar, even if here and there suggestions can be made. The difficulty can easily be illustrated by the small mosaic panel at Mafjar (fig. 71), whose location on the main axis and formal distinction obviously identifies it as meaningful in some special way. Yet no acceptable explanation has been provided for this strange fruit and knife.

Lest all of this appear discouraging, one last point may be made about the representational decoration of these Umayyad country establishments. They are quite unique and without immediate followers, at least within our present knowledge. This suggests that, while they are of great importance for an understanding of the eighth century and its taste, they may not be that important per se for an understanding of the formation of Islamic art. As illustrations of a certain princely, private style of life, their contribution to an evolution of art and of taste was minimal. Their significance lies first on a more general typological level as the art of a nouveau riche taste, akin perhaps to that of Hollywood movie stars a generation ago or to that of the Mongols later on in the Middle Ages. At the same time each of the major monuments of this art—especially Qusayr Amrah, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Qasr al-Hayr West—expresses the unique, personal desires of a prince. It is through a deeper perception of the private character of early Islamic princes that the Umayyads’ elucidation may come about. Their historical importance, if any, is that they demonstrate in a way hitherto not seen the great accumulation in one region of themes and motifs from all over the Muslim world. But it is not this particular artistic moment that created a style or a synthesis out of the wealth of its themes, for it was too tied to a unique set of circumstances.

While the Umayyad country estates are the most spectacular and original monuments of early Islamic secular art, they were not the only ones, and royal foundations existed in cities as well. About the

Umayyad capitals in Syria, Damascus, and Rusafa, we know next to nothing. Except for the fact that they were provided with a room called the Green Dome, and in spite of the partial excavations carried out at Rusafa, it is not possible to reconstruct their internal arrangements or even to imagine the functions that were carried out in them. It is even uncertain whether the Damascus building was an original Umayyad creation or a reused older Byzantine one. Some of the features and associations found in Syrian city palaces were carried over to Iraq, at least to the major palace erected by Hajjaj in Wasit. The latter has unfortunately never been excavated, but something of its possible shape can be imagined from the excavated but incompletely published palace at Kufah (fig. 64). It was known as a dar al-imarah or house of government. The implication is primarily that of an administrative building, perhaps even more than of a residence and, while the available archaeological evidence is not sufficiently clear, it is perhaps possible to suggest that some of the units around the courtyards were used for offices or iwans as well as for residential purposes. The main official unit with its iwan-like basilical hall and its domed room appears to be a combination of Sassanian and Mediterranean features similar to what is otherwise known in Mshatta. It is also possible that the existence of organized smaller living units or offices in city establishments like that of Kufah had an influence on the similar units of late country palaces like Mshatta and Ukhaydir.

Thus the limited existing evidence for the earliest city palaces does not bring to light any significant architectural difference from the residential units of country estates, the only important new characteristic being that they are almost always located next to the main city mosque. Such is the case of the culmination of this first series of buildings, the impressive palace of the caliphs in the Bagdad of Mansur, which has been discussed earlier. It may be simply recalled that almost nothing is known about its internal arrangements, except that administrative functions seem to have been taken out of the palace itself and that its main formal unit was some sort of combination of iwans and domes.

An important side aspect of these city palaces is that, once they have been excavated, they yield a far more limited amount of architectural decoration than the country estates. Aside from confirming the uniqueness of the latter’s ornamental exuberance, this fact also
indicates that the princes apparently avoided artistic ostentatiousness in their earliest establishments in the midst of cities.

The Baghdad of the second half of the eighth century (fig. 10) can be considered as the beginning of a second series of city palaces. It will be recalled that the whole layout and symbolic associations of the City of Peace were those of a palace, of an imperial building. Its imperial connotation derives, at least in part, from the sheer magnitude of the construction. As Baghdad grew by a constant addition of suburbs, ruling caliphs, princes, and at times viziers and other wealthy men started building palaces and residences. These are known only by their names—palaces of the Crown, of Paradise, of the Elephant, of Kingship. Although incidental accounts indicate very little of their shape or of the events that took place in them, they give an impression that is quite alien to what is known of earlier cities. It is that, in the midst of a teeming, proletarian city, there were large numbers of imperial and aristocratic establishments with a variety of functions and dimensions. They were not all built at the same time nor did they always remain in use after the lifetime of their builder. But both popular memory and chronicles have preserved an association between these buildings and social events, such as the marriage of Ma’mun’s daughter, which had struck the imagination of the time. Attached therefore to Baghdad was the dimension of a city of brilliant imperial life.

Some idea of what it all looked like can be suggested by the ninth-century buildings at Samarra, the enormous succession of cities built along the Tigris to serve as military and administrative centers away from the popular turmoil of Baghdad itself. The relationship between the two cities is not unlike that of Versailles and Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The archaeological exploration of Samarra is far from being complete and what is available is not more than a schematic view. Let us take as an example the Jawasq al-Khaqani (fig. 90). It was an immense building, comprising some 432 acres, of which 172 were gardens, and entirely surrounded by high walls with only one main entrance and provided inside with a large number of little understood units. Its formal part was on the axis and consisted of a succession of gates separated by open spaces leading to a cruciform official unit with a central domed hall opening on iwans and courts. Between branches of the cross were baths, a mosque, and probably some living quarters. The immensity of the royal compound was like a forbidden town within the city. Such a development is not unique. The Roman imperial palaces on the Palatine, the Great Palace at Constantinople, belong to the same typological series, as do, for instance, the Kremlin or Peking. The tradition remained as a major feature of Islamic palace architecture. The Fatimid palaces of Cairo and in a way much of the city of Cairo, some of the North African palaces, Madinah al-Zahra in Spain, and eventually the Alhambra, all followed in the footsteps of the Baghdad and Samarra creations of the late eighth and ninth centuries.

While the general point of the size of these royal entities seems clear enough, the difficulty lies in imagining them as functioning units and thus in being able to identify those architectural or decorative forms that characterize them. Archaeological information is simply insufficient, even if a detail like the cruciform arrangement of formal parts in Samarra finds a striking parallel in Central Asian palaces. Textual information is also inadequate, for nowhere, to my knowledge, do we read a description that can incontrovertibly be translated into architectural forms. Literary sources do, however, provide a number of moods surrounding the city palaces created during the first centuries of Islam.

One mood, merely continuing what has been seen in Umayyad country establishments, is that of pleasure. City palaces were used for drinking bouts, singing and poetry recitals, feasts, and orgies. Harems were found in them, whether or not they reached Hollywood proportions. Game preserves served for hunting. Out of this mood one form seems to emerge: the pavilion or kiosk, typically a small and secluded domed construction set in the midst of an artificial nature, usually provided with fountains and running water. There are clear paradisiac implications in these pavilions, and it is from the sense of pleasure that the spectacular medieval Islamic development of an architecture of water was derived, the first examples of which occurred at Khirbat al-Mafjar. Pavilions and water were not necessarily limited to the closed compounds of the palaces. In Fatimid Cairo they are found all over the city, but this may have been a peculiarity of that dynasty whose validity for the rest of the Muslim world cannot be demonstrated. And it is in the Fatimid-inspired architecture of Sicily that we find some of the earliest remaining examples of this type of pavilion with water. The origins
of these forms and of the mood associated with them were probably quite varied, since both Roman gardens and Sassanian monuments and ceremonies provided comparative models. The former are, however, several centuries removed from the ninth century in Iraq, and what we know of the latter is far too colored by Islamic developments to be used indiscriminately. While there is nothing original about palaces as places of pleasure, the "pleasure domes" of Islam acquired a peculiar coloring of their own and an indication of this uniqueness is the rapidity with which Byzantium and the Christian West understood it as such and either imitated them or rejected them as sensuous evil.

A second mood, also occurring in country establishments but acquiring in the cities an enormous importance, was the official one, which we may best define by reproducing al-Khatib’s account in the History of Baghdad of the arrival of Byzantine ambassadors to the Abbasid capital in A.D. 917:

Then it was commanded that the ambassadors should be taken round the palace. Now there were no soldiers here, but only the eunuchs and the chamberlains and the black pages. The number of the eunuchs was seven thousand in all, four thousand of them white and three thousand black; the number of the chamberlains was also seven thousand, and the number of the black pages, other than the eunuchs, was four thousand; the flat roofs of all the palace being occupied by them, as also of the banqueting-halls. Further, the store-chambers had been opened, and the treasures therein had been set out as is customary for a bride’s array; the jewels of the Caliph being arranged in trays, on steps, and covered with cloths of black brocade. When the ambassadors entered the Palace of the Tree and gazed upon the Tree, their astonishment was great. For there they saw birds fashioned out of silver and whistling with every motion, while perched on a tree of silver weighing 500 dirhams. Now the wonder of the ambassadors was greater at seeing these than at any of the other sights that they saw.

... The number of the hangings in the Palaces of the Caliph was thirty-eight thousand. These were curtains of gold—of brocade embroidered with gold—all magnificently figured with representations of drinking-vessels, and with elephants

and horses, camels, lions, and birds. There were also long curtains, both plain and figured, of the sort made at Basinna, in Armenia, at Wasit, and Bahana; also embroideries of Dabik to the number of thirty-eight thousand; while of the curtains that were of gold brocade, as before described, these were numbered at twelve thousand and five hundred. The number of the carpets and mats of the kinds made at Jahram and Darabgird and at Ad-Dawrak was twenty-two thousand pieces; these were laid in the corridors and courts, being spread under the feet of the nobles, and the Greek Envoys walked over such carpets all the way from the limit of the new Official Gate, right to the presence of the Caliph—but this number did not include the fine rugs in the chambers and halls of assembly, of the manufacture of Tabaristan and Dabik, spread over the other carpets, and these were not to be trodden with the feet.

The envoys of the Greek Emperor, being brought in by the Hall of the Official Gate were taken first to the palace known as the Khan al-Khayal (the Cavalry House). This was a palace that was for the most part a peristyle court with marble columns. On the right side of this house stood five hundred horses caparisoned each with a saddle of gold or silver, while on the left side stood five hundred horses with brocade saddle-cloths and long head-covers; also every horse was held in hand by a groom magnificently dressed. From this palace the ambassadors passed through corridors and halls, opening one into the other, until they entered the Park of the Wild Beasts. This was a palace with various kinds of wild animals therein, who entered it from the park and came up close to the visitors, sniffing them, and eating from their hands. Next the envoys went out to the palace where stood four elephants caparisoned in peacock-silk brocade; and on the back of each were eight men of Sind, and javelin-men with fire, and the sight of these caused much terror to the Greeks. Then they came to a palace where there were one hundred lions, fifty to the right hand and fifty to the left, every lion being held in by the hand of its keeper, and about its head and neck were iron chains.

Then the envoys passed to what was called the New Kiosk which is a palace in the midst of two gardens. In the center was an artificial pond of white lead, round which flows a stream of
white lead more lustrous than polished silver. This pond was thirty cubits in the length by twenty across, and round it were set four magnificent boats with gilt seats adorned with embroidery of Dabik, and the pavilions were covered over with the gold work of Dabik. All round this tank extended a garden with lawns with palm-trees, and it is said that their number was four hundred, and the height of each is five cubits. Now the entire height of these trees, from top to bottom, was enclosed in carved teak-wood, encircled with gilt copper rings. And all these palms bore full-grown dates, which were not quite ripe. Round the sides of the garden also are citrons and also other kinds of fruit. The ambassadors went out of this palace, and next came to the Palace of the Tree, where there is a tree standing in the midst of a great circular pond filled with clear water. The tree has eighteen branches, every branch having numerous twigs, on which sit all sorts of gold and silver birds, both large and small. Most of the branches of this tree are of silver, but some are of gold, and they spread into the air carrying leaves of divers colors. The leaves of the tree move as the wind blows, while the birds pipe and sing. On the one side of the palace, to the right of the tank, are the figures of fifteen horsemen, mounted upon their mares, and both men and steeds are clothed capsarined in brocade. In their hands the horsemen carry long-poled javelins, and those on the right are all pointed in one direction it being as though each was attacking his adversary, for on the left hand side is a like row of horsemen. Next the Greek envoys entered the Palace of Paradise. Here there were carpets and furniture in such quantity as cannot be detailed or enumerated, and round the hall were hung ten thousand gilded breastplates. From hence the ambassadors went forth crossing a corridor that was three hundred cubits in length, on either side of which were hung some ten thousand other pieces of arms, bucklers, helmets, casques, cuirasses, coats of mail, with ornamented quivers and bows. Here, too, were stationed nearly two thousand eunuchs, black and white, in double line, to right and left.

Then at length, after the ambassadors had thus been taken round twenty-three various palaces, they were brought forth to the Court of the Ninety. Here were the pages of the Privy Chamber, full-armed, sumptuously dressed, each of admirable stature. In their hands they carried swords, small battle-axes, and maces. The ambassadors next passed down the lines formed by the black slaves; the deputy chamberlains, the soldiers, the footmen, and the sons of the chieftains, until they again came to the Presence Hall. Now there were a great number of the Slavic eunuchs in all these palaces, who during the visit were occupied in offering to all present water, cooled with snow, to drink; also sherbets and beer and some of these slaves went round with the ambassadors, to whom, as they walked or sat to take rest in some seven different places, water was thus offered, and they drank.

... Finally, they came again to the presence of the Caliph Muktadir, whom they found in the Palace of the Crown upon the bank of the Tigris. He was arrayed in clothes of Dabik-stuff embroidered in gold, being seated on an ebony throne overlaid with Dabik-stuff embroidered in gold likewise, and on his head was the tall bonnet called galansuwah. Suspended on the right of the throne were nine necklaces, like prayer beads and to the left were seven others, all of famous jewels, the largest of which was of such a size that its sheen eclipsed the daylight. Before the Caliph stood five of his sons, three to the right and two to the left. Then the ambassadors, with their interpreter, halted before Muktakir, and stood in the posture of humility, with their arms crossed.

An enormous amount of information can be derived from this text, even though some terms in it are not very clear and political considerations made this event a unique one. In order to define the official mood of the palaces, three points are of particular significance. One is that only one hall, the bab-al-annah or Official Gate, seems to have had no other function than that of formal reception. All other units were prepared for the occasion. It may be concluded that these palaces did not have functionally defined forms and that human activity determined the function of a given space; thus we encounter once again the peculiarly early Islamic characteristic of formal ambiguity.

The second point is that the description concerns itself primarily with movable things temporarily arranged for this ceremonial oc-
casion. For a performance, treasures and storerooms were emptied out, and royal art seems to have been identified by what a prince owned rather than by the physical nature of the setting in which he lived. Among the very important consequences of this point is that the building was not a formal end in itself but a flexible support, a frame, like the stage of a theater, whose visible aspect could be modified to suit the need of the moment. This aspect of the official mood explains a feature of the decoration of ninth-century palaces in Samarra and Madinah al-Zahra, the only two such buildings whose decoration is partly known. Most of it consisted of large stucco, or at times stone in Spain) panels with a variety of geometric and floral designs (figs. 124, 125). Paintings are known from Samarra but seem to have been limited to private areas (fig. 91). This stucco work does not contain the exuberant representational themes of Umayyad art, nor any epigraphical themes. It may be proposed that both representations and writing were concrete motifs that gave a building a precise meaning, thus tying it to certain functions. Since what was sought in the city palaces was a neutral type of decoration that would not automatically limit the building’s purposes, representations that continued even in the guise of sculptures—as we know from texts, even though no fragments have been preserved—were relegated to the realm of private art. The exceptions that do occur, as in the case of the Fatimids in Egypt, can usually be explained through precise local developments. For instance, while the Fatimids also gave special prominence to beautiful objects and to textiles in their official ceremonies, the latter were usually kept in treasure rooms which served as museums that could be visited. It is possible that some ceremonies took place in these rooms.

The third point deriving from the description of the visit of the Byzantine ambassador is of lesser importance for the arts than for cultural history. In a highly official ceremony, the caliph hardly appeared at all, except at the very end. The impact on Muslim royal practices was that of the ceremonial ways from Iran and not the Mediterranean ones, with their elaborate processions, taken over by Byzantium. The Fatimids of Egypt who did have formal processions are again rather uncharacteristic of the Islamic norm. On the whole, it was an Iranian imperial system of practices which, with modifications, was taken over by Muslim princes, and it is inter-

esting to note that neither in the above account nor in any similar one do we find any expression of anything Islamic, not even a symbol of the presence of judges or of learned men. The realm of the prince as it was made visible to others was, at this time, as unaffected by the faith as the prince’s private palaces were earlier. Herein lies a key aspect of princely culture and hence of princely art. Because it was not modified or controlled by the faith and because it took its themes and practices from the enormous body of habits and motifs inherited from the classical and Near Eastern traditions, it created a system and vocabulary that could be understood by all comparable princely realms. We do not know directly what the Byzantine reaction to the Abbasid display may have been, but, if one can judge from certain Byzantine ceremonies, the palaces built by a Theophilus, and the objects gathered by them in their own treasuries, it seems that the nature and purpose of the Muslim show were perfectly understood and accepted by Constantinople.

Besides the moods of pleasure and office is that of isolation and separateness. The plans of Samarra’s palaces (fig. 90) or of the North African ones exhibit high fortified walls and a remarkable lack of external decoration. But the notion of a prince living in a separate world appears at its best in literature, where it is often connected with a secondary theme, that the interior of the forbidding and forbidden palace consists of a labyrinth of separate elements secretly and mysteriously related to each other. Such a world of courts, pavilions, baths, strange doors, and fantastically elaborate decorations appears in the story of the City of Brass from The Thousand and One Nights. It is from this kind of slightly immoral, if exciting, realm that Harun al-Rashid escapes for his forays into the living city. For, in line with our discussion of Muslim attitudes about the arts, the world of the prince—secluded, rich, and mysteriously complicated—was seen by the Muslim as an evil, and the just man, if called to it, never penetrated it without his own shroud. More is involved in this tradition than a merely moralistic dictum, for the prince and the world he had created became a myth and to a true believer myths, like works of art, were substitutes and deceptions which could tempt but which certainly were obstacles on the path of moral life.

The last category of documents on the art of the court consists in the objects whose importance was already clear in the account of
The Byzantine emperor’s visit. In a general way these were manufactured portable items which, in a variety of ways, served to enhance the prince’s life and prestige. They were kept in treasuries. Some of them were especially made for a given court or prince, but many were of foreign origin, Chinese, Byzantine, perhaps even antique. It is difficult to assess the impact of these objects from alien traditions, but the fact that Fatimid princes in Cairo kept historical souvenirs from the early Abbasid period or saddles purported to have belonged to Alexander the Great indicates that these if not all major Muslim princes continued to define themselves in relationship to the ancient kings of the earth and to contemporary kings and rulers. This theme has been discussed; in practice it explains the continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic art of certain subjects and the rapid success of Islamic motifs in the non-Islamic world. Literary sources also provide information on the techniques of courtly objects. Two of them, goldwork and textiles, were almost entirely controlled by the central government; of the two the most prestigious was textiles. Imperial factories made textiles both for the internal consumption of the palace and as gifts and rewards, for, together with money and positions, it was through the award of textiles that caliphs and governors recompensed their subjects. Large numbers of names of royal textiles are known, as well as the occasional description of some unique piece, but so far not one name of a royal textile has been directly connected with any one of the mass of preserved fragments. Thus one of the key royal techniques whose spread and uses can be demonstrated is almost totally impossible to illustrate, even though so many examples have remained. We do not know, for instance, whether the thousands of so-called tiraz fragments of textiles whose decoration is limited to the name of a prince and to the date and place of manufacture (fig. 101) are remains of the actual objects made for a court or whether the inscription merely indicates some kind of governmental control. The celebrated and often very handsome Buyid textiles (fig. 100), with their elaborate decorative programs, have not yet been established as creations of princely workshops. Even the unique northeastern Iranian silk in the Louvre datable around A.D. 960 has not yet been put in its proper technical and stylistic sequence (fig. 93).

If such are the difficulties in dealing with textiles, about which both texts and fragments are available, it is not surprising that so little is known about other techniques. It is not before the second half of the tenth century that a few gold objects have become identifiable, and most of them, such as a medallion and a ewer (fig. 116) in the Freer Gallery, seem to me to illustrate a renaissance of earlier themes that is more typical of later Islamic art in Iran. A handsome group of Fatimid rock crystals (fig. 92), made around A.D. 1000 in Egypt, is limited in importance because of its late date, the small number of objects, and the technical difficulties involved in working rock crystal. To this rather hopeless state of knowledge there are two exceptions, two series of objects that are sufficiently numerous to warrant a fuller discussion.

The first of these is in a group of ivories from the second half of the tenth century and the early part of the eleventh, all made in Spain (figs. 94–97). They are all caskets of various shapes and were probably used as containers for textiles or other precious possessions. Inscriptions identify the most important ones among them as made for members of the ruling families of Umayyad Spain. They show considerable stylistic and qualitative variations, but an important similarity is their comparatively standard organization: over a field of vegetal ornament covering the whole object are found medallions with animals or personages. The latter illustrate not only the typical themes of a life of pleasure—hunting, enthronement, music, dancing, games—but also a series of more uncommon themes, such as bears attacking men who are catching birds, or riders picking dates from a palm tree. In other words a group of stereotyped images coexist with less understandable ones, for which one could propose some sort of private significance. A fairly wide variety of sources can be supplied for most of the images, from purely classical poses and movements to highly symmetrical textile designs or to Iranian compositions. Even though representational scenes play an important part in the decoration of the ivories and even though the arrangement by medallions gives these scenes a special prominence, there in fact occurs a rather striking balance between the presumed neutral vegetal background and the presumably more important groups with personages. Just as with the Umayyad sculptures of Khirbat al-Mafjar or Qasr al-Hayr West, this decoration reveals an uncertainty about the ultimate nature of the imagery, an uncertainty as to whether ornamental or iconographic values take precedence.