GLASS IN EARLY ISLAMIC PALACES; THE NEW AGE OF SOLOMON

PATRICIA L. BAKER

Our awareness and knowledge of glass production in the lands of the eastern Mediterranean during the early Islamic period have grown with published information regarding the finds emerging from controlled archaeological excavations carried out in the region since the 1930s, while scientific analyses undertaken in more recent times have alerted scholars and students alike to the exciting possibility of isolating certain regional productions. So it is perhaps opportune to explore avenues first signposted by C.J. Lamm (1941), that is: looking at the early medieval chronicles, the geographies, the scientific works and other literary evidence to ascertain how glass was perceived in contemporary society and culture, and whether these perceptions were enduring over time or whether tastes and fashions changed frequently. From the works of al-Jahiz (d. c. 868 CE) in Arabic we can see that in some circles, especially those in the eastern provinces of the Abbasid empire, that is today’s Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, glass vessels were preferred over gold ones because, so the argument went, they were non-porous and non-absorbent, as well as transparent; and that even broken and repaired pieces had a certain second-hand value (McNeill and Waldman 1973, 125–6). And the 11th-century inventory descriptions collected by Ibn al-Zubayr (al-Qaddumi 1996, 77, 132, 183) reveal that in this early period, the clearness and thickness (as demonstrated by its heaviness) of glass were greatly appreciated while contemporary shiny ‘glazed’ fabrics were admired and compared to the brilliant fire-polish surface of glass vessels (Goitein 1999, 174). In this short paper, I wish to look briefly at just one type of glass — that used in an architectural context.

The early rulers of the Islamic Middle East often ordered the incorporation of glass into the architectural decorative schemes of their palaces, as well as those prestige religious buildings such as the major glass mosaic projects embellishing the Dome of the Rock (Jerusalem) and the Great Umayyad Mosque (Damascus). Architectural glass sherd s have been recorded from archaeological excavations of some five of the 17 so-called Umayyad ‘desert palaces’, constructed in the 8th century before the regime’s collapse in 749 CE; five other such sites are considered too ruined to yield useful archaeological results, while Amman and Anjar are viewed as problematic (Grabar 1993, 93). The mosaic schemes at Jerusalem and Damascus, mentioned above, although fragmentary, have received much academic attention (e.g. Grabar 1968; Finster 1970), especially concerning the possible symbolic significance of their pictorial compositions. However, very little information about the glass excavated in the Umayyad palaces has been published with the exception of recent reports by Naama Brosh (1990) and Hayat Salam-Liebich (1978) concerning Khirbat al-Mafjar (Israel) and Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (Syria) respectively; Lafond (1968) indicated architectural glass sherds were discovered at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (west of Palmyra, Syria) but included no details. Occasionally the location of these so-called palaces are in areas long associated with glass production but in some cases, such as Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi and al-Sharqi, west and east of Palmyra respectively, there is no previous history of glass manufacture in the area.

The Umayyad caliphate (661–747 CE) clearly wished that such building complexes promoted ideas of temporal power, authority and prestige so that all those passing through the doors appreciated through their surroundings that this was a residence of an important political personage. The Umayyad rulers may not have adopted the title malik (king) but individually they saw themselves as fulfilling this role. The ‘palaces’ were lavishly decorated with intricate plaster-work, wall and floor-paintings, mosaics and window glass, but were these details included simply to amaze the eyes of the visitor, to entertain and delight the patron and his courtiers or was there another, more symbolic, purpose?

Those who have travelled in the Middle East are aware of the many myths linking the Quranic Prophet Sulayman (the Biblical Solomon) with such sites as Achaemenid Pasargad and Persepolis, constructed in 6th and 5th century BCE, while the Roman temple complex at Baalbek (Lebanon) was, according to the early Islamic commentators, a huge magnificent palace built by Solomon for his Egyptian consort; both Persepolis and Baalbek were described in early Arabic sources as mas'āb Sulayman (Solomon’s resort) (Soucek 1975, 256). Melikian-Chirvani (1971) and Priscilla Soucek (1976) have shown how these myths continued to appeal to medieval Islamic society; Soucek in particular suggests that the glittering and
colourful 7th-century glass mosaic decoration inside the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, itself one of the largest interior surfaces to be covered in this manner, may be seen as conscious, deliberate usage to remind the observer of the magnificence, the justice and the temporal and spiritual power of Solomon, for the Arabic commentator, Wahib b. Munabbih (d. c. 730 CE) stated that the ceiling and walls of the original temple constructed by Solomon were decorated with rubies and other jewels, while Dinawuri (d. c. 895 CE) spoke of that building shining at night because of the gold and precious stones used in its embellishment. This could be linked to another type of decorative architectural glass, usually associated with Christian Syria; the so-called ‘gold-sandwich’ tiles (e.g. inv. no. 54.1.82, Corning Museum of Glass) variously attributed to c. 9th–11th-century Syria or Iraq.

Returning to the Umayyad desert palaces, when the locations of the architectural glass sherds are noted in the published reports – which is not always the case – it appears these were concentrated in the larger main rooms (designated as ‘audience halls’ by the archaeologists) as at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi or in the bath-house as at Khirbat al-Mafjar, in which numerous window glass sherds of many colours, some cold-painted, were found. It should be noted that this latter site is located not far from Tiberias, whose historic bath-house had long been associated with Solomon (Dow 1996, 114). Furthermore, some modern scholars have suggested that the first phase of construction of this Khirbat al-Mafjar site, which includes the luxurious bath-house, was undertaken during the reign of Umayyad ruler Sulayman b. Abd al-Malik (r. 715–717). If this is so, it is logical to suppose that Sulayman was keen to promote any association with such a legendary Quranic prophet; after all he chose Jerusalem, the city most associated with the prophet-king, as his capital of the Umayyad empire. If the bath-house was in fact part of the later building commissioned by Caliph Walid II (r. 743–744), there is still a connection as Walid referred to himself as ‘the son of Da‘ud’ (King David), that is Solomon (Soucek 1993, 119).

But this leads us to the question, why link glass with Solomon? The simple response is, because the Arab commentators did. According to al-Tabari (d. 923 CE), perhaps the most important and influential of the early Islamic historians, Solomon possessed ‘one thousand houses of glass … in which there were three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines transported on the wind’ (Brinner 1991, 154). As well as his fabulous powers which included the ability to understand and speak the languages of wild animals and birds, and to hear all the news carried on the breeze, he had a magic mirror which showed him all the major towns in the known world (E12 ‘Sulayman b. Dawud’). Of course this could refer to a large polished metal mirror but it should be remembered that numerous small glass mirrors, backed with lead or copper, set in plaster of Paris, have been found on Sassanid and early Islamic sites and that many Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land then wore such items about their necks to ‘capture’ the holy light, thought to emanate from saintly relics (Flood 1999, 323–6).

At Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, built around 728–729 CE, numerous coloured window glass sherds were also found during excavations. More importantly for my argument, several examples of a distinctive kind of glass ‘tile’ were found, probably relating to 9th-century occupation of the site: small in size, a series of four moulded clear glass squares, each about 10mm square and 7mm thick, grouped in a square form but with broken edges (suggesting it had been originally larger in size), set in plaster, as displayed in the Palmyra museum (inv. no. 115/8197) (Salam-Liebich 1978, 140). Further north during the 1952 excavations at Raqqah, a similar form of glass tile was found in the so-called ‘audience hall’ of the Abbasid caliph al-Mu’tasim (r. 833–842), which is shown in the Raqqah Room of the National Museum, Damascus, and, according to Lamm (1928, 118, fig. 66), in the ‘audience-hall’ of the mid 9th-century Jawsaq al-Khaqani palace complex at Samarra (Iraq). The Raqqah fragments (Fig. 1) are also of a transparent colourless glass, with a slight green or turquoise tinge. There is every indication that they were made by pouring hot glass into an iron mould containing regular rows of small square indentations, but instead of breaking this up into separate cubes after annealing (as in late 19th/early 20th-century manufacture), the cast ‘sheet’ was used as it was. According to Salam-Liebich (1978) and Abdul-Hak (1960, 88–9), reporting on Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi and Raqqah respectively, remains of plaster were found still adhering to the relief surface, so it was this face that was pressed into the wet plaster, presenting a smooth glassy surface to the observer.

![FIG. 1 Fragment of glass tile from Raqqah; after Joudi et al. 1976, fig. 79](image-url)
Again, we have a possible association with the Solomon’s one thousand glass palaces was built by his jinn (supernatural beings) with the express purpose of dissuading Solomon from any romantic liaison with Bilqis (or Baqis), the Queen of Sheba. Afraid that their power at court would be diminished by the influence of such an astute, intelligent, beautiful, charming lady, they had heard she had but one failing: hirsute legs. They were convinced if Solomon saw this with his own eyes, he would jettison any idea of a relationship; as al-Tabari recorded The demons argued ‘Build a structure for him that will show him that, so he will not marry her’. They built him a castle (qasr) of green glass, making floor tiles (tawabiq) of glass that resembled water. They placed within those tiles every kind of sea creatures, fish, and the like, then they covered it up … ’(Binnner 1991, 162).

This episode is briefly mentioned in the Quran, chapter 27, v. 44. On her arrival, the jinn uncovered the pavement and, thinking it was a stream, Bilqis lifted her robes as she walked towards Solomon and showed indeed she did have this problem (COLOUR PLATE 34). However, they were thwarted. Solomon, although shocked, was so charmed by her company, he determined she would be his queen. His courtiers were dispatched to find a solution and thus the first depilatory paste was invented (Binnner 1991, 163) which, according to Wahb b. Munabbih, was made from lime collected from bath-house pipes (thus another association of bath-houses and Solomon) (Soucek 1993, 115). The legend with or without further embellishments remained a favourite story in early Islamic society, being narrated in numerous tales associated with the early prophets of Islam and then illustrated in certain anthologies in later centuries, such as the Safavid Persian manuscript Majalis al-Ushshay of 1552, prepared for Sultan Husayn Qajar (Ousley ms. Add. 24, fol. 127b, Bodleian Library, Oxford).

Perhaps this legend could be also the inspiration behind the employment of the series of individual glass and mother-of-pearl shapes, lozenge and ovoid, as found also in the Jawsaq al-Khaqani building, Samarra, mentioned above. It is not known whether the setting patterns suggested by Lamm (1928, pl. x, xi) were those of the original scheme but the Abbásid poet, al-Bukhūrī, certainly confirms indirectly that glass was used as revetment and flooring in Abbásid palaces as he described a certain palace room in the following words:

the glass walls of its interior/ were waves beating upon the seashore/ As if its striped marks were streams of rain clouds arrayed between clouds dark and light (Scott-Meisama 2001, 73).

Such stories could be dismissed simply as myth and fantasy but there is no doubt that they endured over the centuries. Many Ottoman and Persian court painters continued to find the subject matter inspirational for their pictorial manuscript compositions. In 16th-century Istanbul, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–1566) was referred to by court chroniclers and commentators as ‘the [new] Solomon of the Age’ (Suleyman-i Zaman), and this analogy he promoted, ordering rose-granite columns to be taken from the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek to embellish his new mosque in Istanbul (Necipoglu 1985). And it is tempting to assume that whenever his grand-daughter, the princess Ismihan Sultan, took her bath in the glass-paneled pavilion she had constructed, overlooking the gardens of her palace in Uskudar, she thought of that Solomon and Bilqis meeting (Necipoglu 1997).

ABBREVIATIONS


REFERENCES

Soucek, P., 1975. Review of Oleg Grabar The Formation of...

PATRICIA L. BAKER
2 Usborne Mews
London SW8 1LR
UK
plbakerisl@yahoo.com