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A BRIEF NOTE ON EARLY ABBASID STUCCO DECORATION.
MADINAT AL-FAR AND THE FIRST FRIDAY MOSQUE OF IŞFAHĀN*

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The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how an in-depth study of the stucco decoration could be useful in dating different phases of the Early Abbasid period in the absence of other precise archaeological evidence. Two case studies are presented: the residence of Madinat al-Far in Syria and the Early Abbasid Mosque of Işfahān in Iran.

Keywords: stucco; Early Abbasid; Madinat al-Far; Işfahān; Friday Mosque

1. EARLY ABBASID STUCCO DECORATION

The Early Abbasid period has been labelled «the dark age of early Muslim archaeology».¹ With the exception of the two sites that surely date back to the early years of the Abbasid caliphate (i.e. Ukhaider and the caliphal city of Raqqa), we can cite not many other buildings of which, unfortunately, only a few parts have survived. The architectural stucco decoration is one element that can be used to help date the buildings due to its particular 'style', which features many aspects common to places located even very far from each other.² Yet despite these common elements, we can observe that many variations occurred over the years before the foundation of Samarra, even in stuccoes coating the same building.

The decorative motifs include vegetal elements with a different degree of 'stylisation'³ and geometric patterns; there are no examples of human or animal figures. One of the most common features - since it appears in all Early Abbasid stucco finds and is also useful for dating - is the 'Sasanian' pearl border, which was highly successful in Umayyad times. Observations show that in the Early Abbasid period, the pearls with drilled holes forming the border were rough and cursory, and their hand-made profile was created with small and usually irregular engravings very different from the circular pearls of the Late-Sasanian and Umayyad examples.⁴ Shortly after (the first examples are probably from Balkh and Samarra),⁵ there seems to have been a return to the Sasanian-Umayyad circular prototypes.

* This paper is based on part of the author's MA thesis (Corsi 2017)

¹ Meinecke 1991, 226.

² This type of stucco decoration has been found over a large territory: from the examples of Madinat al-Far in the west to Samarkand in the east (for bibliographical references cf. notes 7 to 12, below). No studies examined all aspects of this architectural decoration: each find is presented in an archaeological report complete with brief comparative analyses. The studies by Haase (2007) and Meinecke (1991) are the only comprehensive ones, mostly focusing on the area of Bilad al-Sham.

³ Vine scrolls are the most represented motif, with three or five-lobed leaves and grapes. Palmettes or acanthus leaves, pomegranates and lotus flowers are less represented.

⁴ For Sasanian and Late-Sasanian examples see Kröger 1982, especially pls. 14.2, 20.1-3, 37.4, 68.2, 77.1, 88.5, 91.2-4, 95.2, 97.1; Thompson 1976, pl. XVIII, fig. 5. For Umayyad examples from Bilad al-Sham see Grabar 1978, 271, fig. 4; Hamilton 1959, pls. VI.1, XXX.1, XXXIV and Schlumberger 1986, pls. 59.b, 60.b-c, e-f.

⁵ As for the pearl borders from Samarra, see Dept. Ant. Iraq 1940, pls. XXXII, XXXIV; for Balkh see Golombek 1969, 181, figs. 14 and 17.

Although the vegetal and geometric elements were rendered in a similar way in the Early Abbasid stuccoes, two main typologies can be distinguished: a ‘miniaturistic type’ (fig. 1), due to the high number of small vegetal elements filling the geometrical patterns in a free scheme, composed of pairs of stylised leaves and bunches of grapes; and a ‘monumental type’ (fig. 2), accordingly to the proportions of the vegetal elements forming the decoration of the usually narrow vertical panels.⁶

Examples of these Early Abbasid stucco decorations have been found at several sites. In Syria there are examples of both types, although the ‘monumental’ one seems to be a prerogative of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, Madinat al-Far and Raqqa.⁷ In Iraq many stucco panels were recovered from Ctesiphon/al-Mada’in,⁸ Hira⁹ (Najaf) and Habibiyya.¹⁰ As regards the eastern regions (Iran and present-day Uzbekistan and Afghanistan), there are stucco panels from Susa, Bishapur, Siraf, Işfahān,¹¹ Balkh and Samarkand.¹² With the

⁶ The large dimensions of the leaves allow the artist to use just a few elements to fill the vertical panels of the ‘monumental type’ (like those of al-Raqqa, see Daiber - Becker 2004). On the contrary, in the ‘miniaturistic type’ more elements are required to fill similar spaces and thus the work takes longer and is more painstaking.

⁷ The stuccoes of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi were published by Grabar 1978; most of the pearl borders (over half) belong to the so-called type 1, datable to the Abbasid period (ca. 760-780; Grabar 1978, 68, 175-176) and feature sketched pearls instead of the distinct rounded pearls so widespread during the Sasanian and Umayyad epoch, of which we have examples from the same place (see Grabar 1978, 271, fig. Ap. 4). The excavations at Madinat al-Far were directed by C.-P. Haase and have brought to light several stucco fragments and panels still *in situ*, as displayed in many useful plates, see in particular Haase 2007. The huge amount of carved stucco finds from Raqqa has been recently published by Daiber - Becker 2004.

⁸ The old Sasanian capital was excavated by O. Reuther (1930); among the published stucco finds, mostly dated to the Sasanian period, there is a panel identical to an exemplar found at Hira (Reuther 1930, 36), both dated to the early Abbasid period. Nevertheless, some stucco fragments from Ctesiphon, dated from the 6th to the second half of the 8th century and kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, actually show similarities with finds from Abbasid sites such as Habibiyya (cf. n. 10, below). Another lesser known but very important discovery in the area of al-Mada’in has been published by Khatiq (1985-1986) and consists of the stuccoes decorating a room (known as the “room of decorations”).

⁹ The old Lakhmid capital of Hira was excavated in 1931; the stucco finds were published by Talbot-Rice (1934). As stated by the latter «by far the largest group of the stucco work is, however, dated by numismatic and other evidence to the second half of the eighth century A.D.», while another group of cornice fragments are dated, by comparing them with examples from Ctesiphon, to the late Sasanian period (Talbot-Rice 1934, 61). Another mission was started in 2015 under the direction of M. Müller-Wiener in the region of Hira/Najaf in order to identify the area previously excavated and to provide more reliable information on the dating of the different occupations of the site, but as yet no stuccoes have been published (Müller-Wiener *et al.* 2015, 5-7).

¹⁰ Habibiyya lies on the eastern bank of the Tigris; today it is part of the city of Baghdad. The results of the Iraqi excavations were published by Hammoudi (1981).

¹¹ The majority of the early Islamic stucco finds from Susa have been published by Hardy-Guibert (1990). The stucco decoration from Bishapur and attributed to the Early Abbasid period has been published by Salles (1939-1942). Only some small fragments were found at Siraf during Whitehouse’s excavations of the Congregational Mosque, from a layer dated to between 815 and 850 (Whitehouse 1980, pl. V.b). As for Işfahān cf. § 1.2., below.

¹² The stuccoes from the Masjid-i nuh-gunbad of Balkh have been studied by different scholars but their date is not clear. Only the last sondages actually reached the original floor and the lower part of the wall decorations (Adle 2011). The lowest band of the latter shows a stucco ornament recalling the earlier Sasanian compositions from Nizamabad, Chal Tarkhan Ishqabad and Tapa Mill, and the Umayyad ones from Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (cf. n. 31, below), but with higher relief and less attention to detail. If we compare this ornamental band to that of the qibli wall of the earliest Friday Mosque of Işfahān, it is clear that the latter is more similar to the Sasanian and Umayyad examples. Some panels from the mihrāb of the

exception of the Syrian sites, Balkh and, partially, Iṣfahān (see below), the stucco decoration of the other Iranian sites and that of the Iraqi sites features the typical small ‘miniaturistic type’ elements. Most of the vegetal stucco panels found *in situ* in the palaces of Raqqa are of the ‘monumental type’; in this case, the choice of this large-scale ornament may have been originally imposed by the urgency of building the caliphal residences as fast as possible in order to move the court from Baghdad to the new city.

1.1. A case study from Syria: *Madinat al-Far and its chronological sequence*

It is still hard to determine whether a chronological sequence can be established for these two types of stucco decorations, which both existed during the first century of the Abbasid caliphate, and, if so, which one was the earlier. In order to understand the chronological relationship between them it would be necessary to ascertain a more precise dating for the ‘miniaturistic type’ finds in Iraq (i.e. those from Hira, Ctesiphon/Mada’in and Habibiyya), as they are indeed undoubtedly different from both the Iranian ‘miniaturistic type’ examples - with a less naturalistic appearance - and the whole Umayyad *corpus* of Syrian stuccoes.

Iraq was in fact the most important region during the Early Abbasid caliphate: its first capital, Kufa (750-751), is just a few kilometres from Hira; Habibiyya is located in the present-day territory of Baghdad. The stucco decoration of Harun al-Rashid’s Raqqa should be dated some years after 796, roughly around 800; thus we lack certain data about the architectural stucco decoration between the end of the Umayyad period (the last evidence comes from Khirbat al-Mafjar)¹³ and the foundation of Raqqa. In fact, only these stuccoes have been dated on the basis of archaeological evidence, while the majority of the stuccoes from the other Abbasid sites mentioned have been dated by stylistic analyses.¹⁴ Among the latter, the case of Madinat al-Far is remarkable as it is the only one that shows clear evidence of a decorative development: the decoration of one of the panels found there was most likely influenced by that of the Samarra ‘B style’ stuccoes¹⁵ and thus datable to the mid-9th century, while the patterns of the other panels are stylistically closer to those of Umayyad and, mostly, Early Abbasid specimens.¹⁶ It is difficult to establish the chronological sequence of the latter, mostly referring to those found *in situ* in the same rooms,¹⁷ of which at least two exemplars are very similar to those from the Raqqa palaces (fig. 3),¹⁸ while others show precise parallels with the ‘miniaturistic type’ decoration of

Nuh-Gumbad Mosque, brought to light during the last works (Adle 2011, 601), show few similarities with stuccoes from Raqqa (see Daiber - Becker 2004, pls. 22.c, 23.d-e). Finally, as for Samarkand, several stucco panels and semi-column coatings were recovered in the area of the mosque and published by Grenet - Isamidinov - Bernard (1992, 306, 307).

¹³ See Hamilton 1959.

¹⁴ Grabar 1978, 68; Grenet - Isamidinov - Bernard 1992, 305, 308; Hardy-Guibert 1990, 292.

¹⁵ Haase 2007, 447 and fig. 12.

¹⁶ In this regard cf. Haase 2007, 444-446.

¹⁷ Haase 2007, 447-448, figs. 9, 14-15.

¹⁸ As for space, the decoration from Madinat al-Far is the closest to that from Raqqa. Two panels in particular resemble the examples from the capital, with the typical “monumental” size of the vegetal elements (see Haase 2007, 445, 448, figs. 4, 15).

panels from Iraq (fig. 4).¹⁹ Two hypotheses could be suggested in this regard: the ‘monumental type’ panels were modelled on those from Raqqa due to the vicinity of the latter and the fashion originating in this caliphal city or, instead, given the many ‘monumental’ finds from this region they could testify to a ‘Syrian style’ developed after the Umayyad period, less accurately and naturalistically executed – placed on door jambs and *mihrābs* only.²⁰ In this case the ‘miniaturistic type’ stuccoes of Madinat al-Far would attest to a secondary influence from the Iraqi region.²¹

1.2. A case study from Iran: the Early Abbasid Friday Mosque of Isfahān

Another interesting chronological sequence from the Abbasid period is to be found in the earliest *Masjid-i Jum'a* of Isfahān. The first phase of this mosque is datable to 767 CE.²² The Italian excavations (1972-1978) identified both the *qiblī* wall and the *mihrāb* of the first Abbasid mosque, with a different orientation compared to the present-day one, and some traces of a previous Sasanian occupation.²³ The *mihrāb* was found in sector 190, which corresponds to the south domed hall; the *qiblī* wall was unearthed in the western sectors 204-205 and 218-219.

The stucco panels found *in situ* on both the *mihrāb* and the *qiblī* wall are of great interest. The decoration of the fragmentary right panel of the rectangular niche of the *mihrāb* (fig. 5) consists of an interlacing geometric pattern, formed by a pearl band with small leaves filling the twists. Leaves of a similar type have been also found in the central panel of the *mihrāb* (fig. 6), which is more fragmentary and displays the typical small vegetal elements of the ‘miniaturistic type’.²⁴ Instead the interlacing motif of the right panel is an *unicum* among the Abbasid stuccoes and may be related to the later specimens from the 10th-century Friday Mosque of Nayin.²⁵

The decoration of the *qiblī* wall (figs. 7-8), perfectly preserved for a height of 92 cm ca., that corresponds to the cut made during the building of the second Abbasid Mosque (841-42), is completely different from that of the *mihrāb*. The stuccoes are enclosed by rectangular panels (52 cm wide) separated by narrow vertical pearl listels and show a larger variety of vegetal elements than those of the *mihrāb*, rendered in higher relief: they range from typical vine leaves (but without the usual bunches of grapes) to different kinds of

¹⁹ As stated by Haase, the decoration of several panels resembles those of specimens from Hira (Haase 2007, 453 fig. 6, 456 fig. 11, 457 fig. 14).

²⁰ Parallels can be found in some Abbasid panels from Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (Grabar 1978, 58, figs. 140-141).

²¹ Haase 2007, 449.

²² Cf. Duva on this issue.

²³ The first acquaintance with the Sasanian phase consists of the discovery by E. Galdieri of a pillar, attributed to the Sasanian period thanks to its preserved stucco decoration (see Galdieri 1972, 369 and fig. XII.d and f).

²⁴ Furthermore, some fragments of stucco decoration unearthed during the excavation works in the southern domed hall show the ‘miniaturistic’ features, similar to those of the *mihrāb* (Scerrato 1973, 418, fig. 8). Similar leaves have been found in Iran; in particular, the sharp-cornered leaves from the *mihrāb* right panel can be related to those from Bishapur (cf. Ghirshman 1956, pl. XXII) and Susa (cf. Hardy-Guibert 1990, 279, fig. 5).

²⁵ A geometric stucco pattern with interlaced pearl bands covers the pillars of the mosque, incorporating stylised small vegetal elements (see Flury 1930, pls. VIII.1, IX.1).

flowers, shrubs and palmettes.²⁶ It is difficult to find such a variety of elements placed together in Early Abbasid stuccoes, and some of the elements mentioned may be more easily related to Umayyad examples from Iran.²⁷ Strong parallels are to be noted not only with the more naturalistic late Sasanian-Umayyad features but also with typical Early Abbasid stucco vegetal elements, such as stylised five-lobed leaves with drilled holes and engraved veins, and frames with sketched pearls showing a particular similarity to the Raqqa panels.²⁸ The direct comparison with Raqqa, together with the archaic taste of many of the *qiblī* wall panels, makes this decoration a combination of Umayyad and Early Abbasid features.

1.2.1. The Early Abbasid Friday Mosque of Isfahān: a hypothesis on the chronological sequence of its stucco panels

Umberto Scerrato stated that two floors pertinent to the first Abbasid mosque have been found: the original walking surface corresponds to the plastered floor - «a beaten layer of lime mixed with earth»²⁹ - in front of the *mihrāb* (fig. 6); as regards the second floor (a restoration work preceding the construction of the second Abbasid mosque) only traces of small square tiles on the mortar of the ground in front of the *qiblī* wall remain (fig. 7).³⁰

Looking at the ornamental stucco motifs of the *mihrāb* and *qiblī* walls, it is evident that they do not belong to the same decorative phase due to the clear differences observed above. Only the lower ornamental bands display similar features, showing a Sasanian-Umayyad-inspired motif made up of a modular composition of four lance-shaped leaves forming an X-shaped motif, with a concentrically geometric pattern filling the spaces.³¹

²⁶ Some of the stylised plants on the *qiblī* wall seem to represent sweetwater plants due to their large leaves and wavy profile. Of particular interest is the small tree depicted on the central panel of the *qiblī* wall portion displayed in fig. 8, which may be interpreted as an olive plant (*olea oleaster*) due to the shape of the leaves and the stylised small flowers (I would like to express my deepest thanks to Dr Alessandra Celant whom I consulted about this plant). On the left panel in the same fig. 8 the five-lobed leaf can be related to other ones from Raqqa (see Daiber - Becker 2004) and Samarkand (Grenet - Isamiddinov - Bernard 1992, 306 fig. 22b). In the left panel shown in fig. 7 the pointed elements may represent closed acanthus flowers or large sweetwater flowers. The small elements depicted in the centre of the right panel in fig. 8 can be interpreted as papyrus flowers. The whole decoration may have been inspired by the species of the Isfahān territory since some plants are unique among the other early Abbasid stuccoes. On the contrary, the less distinctive vine leaves on the *mihrāb* represent the most widespread vegetal species, attested in almost every early Abbasid stucco find.

²⁷ The decoration of the plant in fig. 8, interpreted as an *olea oleaster*, is particularly interesting. It can be compared to more naturalistic examples from nearby Tapa Mil and Qal'a Gawri (Hasanpur - Hashemi 2016, fig. 3.19) and in particular from Chal Tarkhan - Ishqabad (see Thompson 1976, pls. XIV.5, 6, 7 and XVIII.5). A similar plant seems to be represented in a panel from Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (Talgam 2004, fig. 73). There is no comparison for this plant with those illustrated in stucco exemplars from the Abbasid period.

²⁸ For many examples of similar leaves, see Daiber - Becker 2004, pls. 58-60.

²⁹ Scerrato 1977, 453.

³⁰ Scerrato 2001, XLII.

³¹ The lower motif is a well-known decorative pattern, attested at several sites since the late Sasanian period: Chal Tarkhan Ishqabad (see Thompson 1976, pl. XVII.2), Tapa Mil (see Kröger 1982, pl. 96.1), Nizamabad (see Kröger 1982, pl. 65.1-2), Qal'a Gawri (see Hasanpur - Hashemi 2016, figs. 3.14, 4.1-2), and probably Susa (see the small fragment published by Kröger 1982, pl. 92.2). Other examples from Umayyad residences in Syria were found at Khirbat al-Mafjar (see Hamilton 1959, pls. VI.1-3, XXXIV.5), Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (see Schlumberger 1986, pl. 77.b) and the 'Amman citadel (see Arce 2001, 138, fig. 6a). Examples of the

This pattern is employed in its complete form on the lower band of the *qiblī* wall, while on the *mihrāb* lower band it is composed of just the upper half, certainly following a planned scheme, since the lowest plain listel confirms that the motif was closed.

It is interesting to note that the flooring of the second phase identified by Scerrato, found only in front of the *qiblī* wall, cuts the decoration of the above-mentioned lower band precisely in half, leaving out just its upper part (fig. 7). This evidence could suggest that the decoration of the lower band of the *mihrāb* panels was planned following a scheme which includes only the upper half of the whole pattern, in order to establish continuity with the *qiblī* wall decoration that remained in view in this second phase (fig. 9).³² Therefore the *mihrāb* panels should not date to the first phase of the first Abbasid mosque but rather they should be coeval to the ‘second flooring’ found in front of the *qiblī* wall or, more probably, even subsequent to it, given the absence of both tiles or their traces.³³ Furthermore, the right panel - where the lower band does not contain a pearl band - seems to have been added later next to the central panel (fig. 5).³⁴ In addition, the decoration of the lower band of the *mihrāb* panels is less precise, as evidenced by leaves of different sizes and irregular shapes. The lower degree of craftsmanship of these panels, imitating the high-quality decoration of the *qiblī* wall, can be identified thanks to the careless execution.

Due to the dating of the mosque (767 CE) these *qiblī* wall stucco panels are the earliest datable examples from the Abbasid period. Although the small vine scroll motif (including the ‘miniaturist type’ features) is well attested in Iran during the Early Abbasid period, as displayed in the examples from Nayin, Bishapur, Susa and Nishapur,³⁵ it should be attributed, at least for the case of Iṣfahān, to later artistic development. Numerous fragments of this kind have been recovered in sector 190 (the Nizam al-Mulk’s southern hall) in the Seljuk filling.³⁶

Abbasid period can be found at Mada’in (see Khatiq 1985-1986) and Balkh (see Adle 2011, 601, fig. 20). For the case of Balkh, despite the same position of the decorative pattern if compared to that of Iṣfahān, the rendering is considerably different from the latter with its simpler forms and fewer details.

³² This continuity can be confirmed by the measurements of the lower band of the *qiblī* wall. The lower band of the *qiblī* wall with the modular motif of lance-shaped leaves measures 16 cm in height, while the upper half (with a flat listel and pearl band) is approximately 8 cm high. The ratio between these two parts is 2:1, corresponding to the 1:1 ratio between the same parts on the *mihrāb* central panel, since just the upper half of the lower pattern was produced.

³³ In this case the *mihrāb* panels could testify to a possible third phase of the first Abbasid mosque.

³⁴ Two or more phases can be reasonably hypothesised since the literary sources record an enlargement of the first Abbasid Mosque (see Duvà in this issue, n. 53). The slight space on the corner between the central and right panel of the *mihrāb* (fig. 5) may suggest that the latter was subsequently placed against the central panel.

³⁵ Cf. n. 11, above. Another particularly interesting case of a renewed decoration phase of a *mihrāb* is to be found at Nishapur. The refurbishment is linked to new flooring 16 cm higher placed in front of Tapa Madrasa Mosque *mihrāb* (Wilkinson 1986, 119-123). In this case there was an overlap of panels, with the more ancient ones (highly damaged, but clearly showing a decoration with tiny leaves and bunches of grapes) covered by another panel with different patterns. It is interesting that in the case of Iṣfahān there was neither an overlapping nor a trace of the removal of a previous panel.

³⁶ Scerrato 1973, fig. 8; 1976, 595, figs. 14-15.

2. CONCLUSIONS

A second phase, testified by the new flooring, probably influenced the *mihrāb* stucco decoration of the first Abbasid Friday Mosque of Iṣfahān. Information inferred from the patterns of the lower bands shows that the *mihrāb* panels should be dated later than those of the *qiblī* wall. This hypothesis is supported by the more archaic look of the *qiblī* stuccoes, which finds parallels not only with Abbasid examples but also with late Sasanian and Umayyad specimens. This decorative type might be the most ancient decorative stucco find from the Abbasid period. Thus, the ‘miniaturistic type’ decoration identified on the *mihrāb* panels represents a later development, which was extremely successful in Iran during the 9th and 10th centuries.

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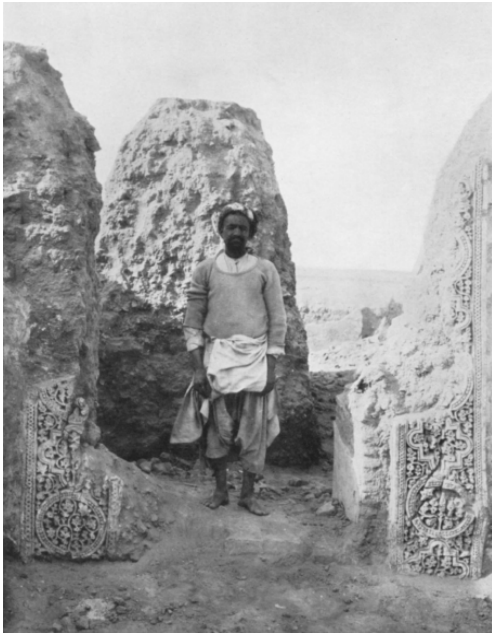


Fig. 1 - Hira, stucco panels from Building 1 (after Talbot-Rice 1934).



Fig. 2 - Stucco panel from Raqqa (after Daiber - Becker 2004).



Fig. 3 - Madinat al-Far, stucco panel from S. 21 (after Haase 2007).



Fig. 4 - Madinat al-Far, fragment of a stucco panel from S. 21 (after Haase 2007).

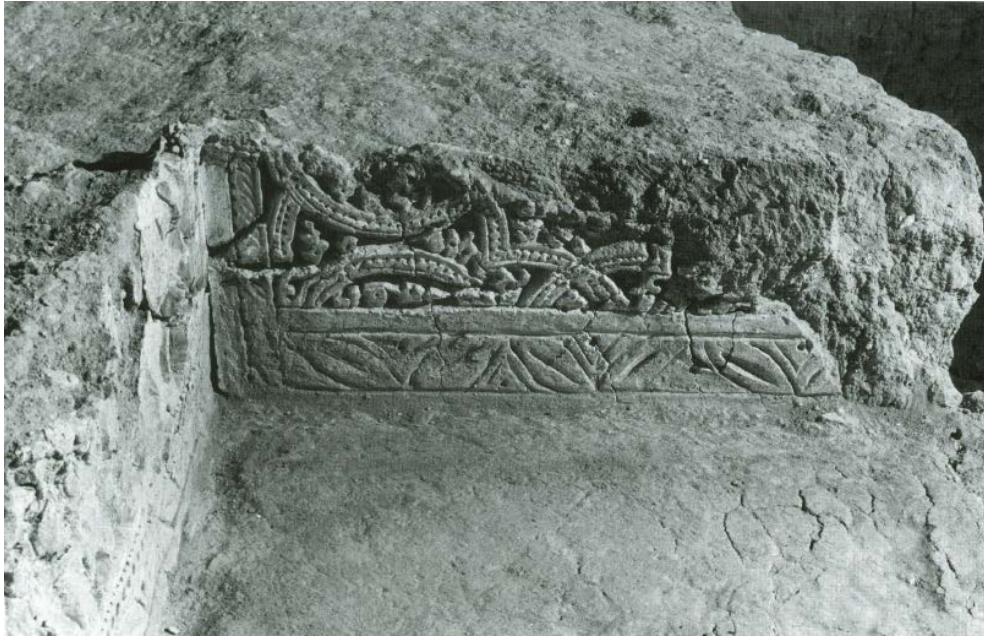


Fig. 5 - Isfahān, first Abbasid Friday Mosque, *mihrāb*, right stucco panel (after Scerrato 2001).



Fig. 6 - Isfahān, first Abbasid Friday Mosque, *mihrāb*, central stucco panel (after Scerrato 2001).



Fig. 7 - Isfahān, first Abbasid Friday Mosque, *qiblī* wall (sector 204), stucco panels (after Scerrato 2001). Traces of the flooring “cutting” the lower band of the panels in half.



Fig. 8 - Isfahān, first Abbasid Friday Mosque, *qiblī* wall (sector 205), stucco panels during the process of discovery (after Scerrato 2001).

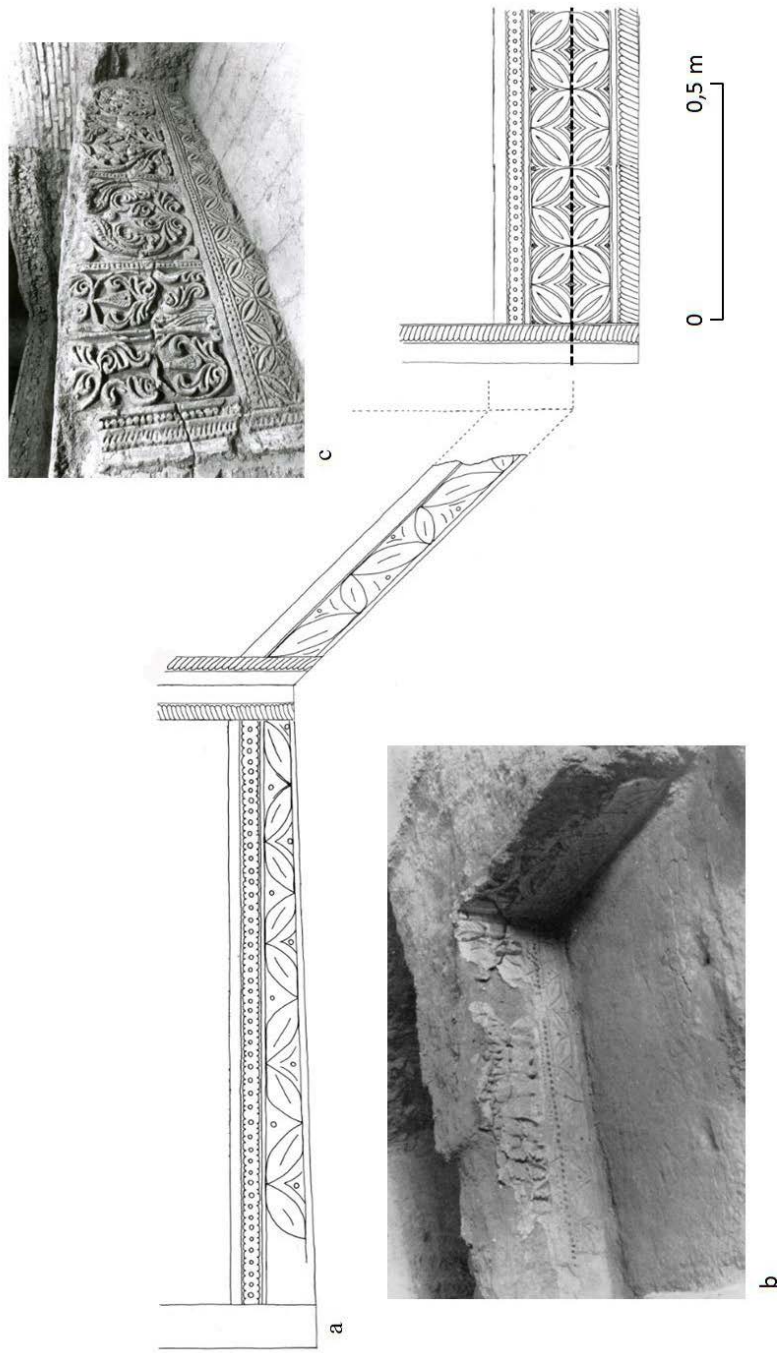


Fig. 9 - a) Reconstruction of the stucco lower decoration of the *mihrāb* and *qiblā* wall; b) the *mihrāb* of the first Abbasid Friday Mosque; c) the *qiblā* wall, a detail (drawing by the author).