

The Persian Gulf in the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods as an “Artistic Region”

The aim of this research project is to understand what was the “artistic landscape” of the Persian Gulf region in the period under the rule of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties (7th-13th centuries). It will be achieved by answering questions such as: How were artistic ideas transferred from one site to another? Did artists, workshops, and art objects travel around the region? Which art objects are originals and which are copies? Because artistic culture of the Persian Gulf in this time period is known almost exclusively through architecture (ground plans, architectural features and solutions) and architectural decorations executed in stucco, the project will be based on these two categories of tangible heritage.

Previous studies on the art of the Early Islamic and Medieval Islamic Persian Gulf were often hindered by the lack of interdisciplinary approach. Architectural remains and architectural stucco decorations are usually being excavated by archaeologists who then use archaeological approach in order to understand these finds. On the contrary, the art historical methods are rarely being applied. Moreover, the research field lacks in-depth analyses and interpretations. For example, while a number of authors noted similarities between particular buildings and their decorations, there were few attempts to understand the nature of these similarities. In other words, it was not determined whether these similarities are of very general character and meaningless for the understanding of artistic influences or if it is quite the contrary and they indicate – for example - the dissemination of artistic patterns. The innovative character of this project is in the use of both art historical and archaeological knowledge and methods. It will allow to overcome the fragmented approach characteristic for previous studies and establish a more complete picture of the subject. The result of this project will be then the first comprehensive study of art of Christian and Muslim communities living on the islands and coasts of the Persian Gulf in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods.

The project goal will be achieved mainly through first-hand analyses of stucco fragments and archaeological remains from a number of Christian and Islamic sites in the region, foremostly: al-Qusur (Kuwait), Sir Bani Yas (the UAE), Kharg (Iran), Samahij (Bahrain), Jumeirah (the UAE), Al-Ain/Buraimi Oasis (the border of the UAE and Oman), Siraf (Iran). Part of the research will be based on publications and unpublished excavation data. In the study of the stucco fragments and architecture, the art historical methods of formal and comparative analysis - which allow point out similarities and differences between particular art objects and buildings - will be used. Archaeological approach will be instrumental for the proper understanding of structural relationships between architecture and decorations as well as for dating. For the better interpretation of the results of these studies, geographical conditions and historical factors will be also taken into account.