



EXPERIENCE

REFERENCES TO ROME IN THE EARLY ABBASIDS' VISUAL LANGUAGE OF POWER, 762-861 CE

PhD dissertation by Rhiannon Garth Jones



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

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This dissertation re-examines the literary and material evidence for the early Abbasid visual language of power in the public spaces of the three capital cities, Baghdad, Rafiqa, and Samarra. It grounds the Abbasids in late antiquity, and specifically focuses on references to Rome, one of the key imperial reference points for the Abbasid caliphs. The analysis presents new interpretations of Abbasid imperial architecture and spaces, with implications for our understanding of the Abbasid understanding of power, legacy, and their relationship with their imperial rival.

Monumental language and linguistic monuments

The Abbasid caliphs understood monumental buildings and city foundation as a language of power in the tradition of late antiquity, represented by iconic rulers like Alexander and Solomon. However, they were also keenly aware of the limitations of buildings: their possible impermanence and the symbolism of ruins, a major topos of Arabic poetry. They therefore treated the literary reception of their building programmes as an intended part of their projection of power, combining different traditions in an interwoven, indissoluble relationship to ensure a longer-lasting record of their achievements.

A universal claim to power

The relationship between the early Abbasids and Rome was important to the caliphs, beyond

their military engagements. Projecting power to and over Rome was part of how they claimed universal power to all their audiences. Their relationship with Rome was rooted in the shared traditions of late antiquity: Alexander and Solomon, monumental buildings and urbanity, the practical application of intellectual accomplishments and astonishing craftsmanship. It was frequently communicated via the late antique visual *koiné* which developed across Eurasia over the previous millennium and contributed to an ongoing shared *koiné* with Rome.

Re-thinking the Abbasid style

One element of the rivalry with Rome was the use of craftsmanship to provoke wonder, drawing on Solomonic traditions. This context, combined with the literary evidence for the role of light in public audience spaces, was used to reconsider palatial architectural decoration. The caliphs manipulated light in their public spaces to create an ephemeral, constantly changing space where frescoes and precisely carved materials such as marble, stucco, and wood could be mistaken for the costly textiles that also decorated the rooms. The result would have been a dazzling, dizzying projection of power.

A 'classical' inheritance

The Abbasids clearly felt a sense of ownership over the 'classical' intellectual and visual traditions of their formerly Roman territories and contemporary Roman rival. They were willing to re-use, when appropriate, Roman gate-doors and building stone as well as visual motifs that connected them with the Roman world. Meanwhile, they frequently argued the intellectual traditions of antiquity were incompatible with Roman Christianity, in favour of their own claims to ownership, dispossessing their predecessors and rivals while constructing their own identity.

The Abbasid visual language of power

The caliphs of this period had access to an extraordinary range of resources to project their power and they used them to build cities, monuments, and palaces, which they then promoted through literature to ensure a longer-lasting legacy. In constructing and decorating these spaces, the Abbasid rulers exploited the traditions and visual *koiné* of late antiquity to provoke wonder, connecting themselves with legendary rulers like Alexander and Solomon and projecting power to and over their Roman imperial rivals.

Re-thinking a 'Golden Age'

The early Abbasid period (749-861 CE) is often understood as a 'Golden Age' of Islam, within which time 'classical' Islamic art, architecture, and culture was formed. Consequently, the monumental architecture of this period and its décor have been foundational to the study of Islamic art and archaeology. This re-assessment of the literary and material evidence for the period, grounding it within late antiquity and reinforcing connections to the Roman world as well as Persian, pushes new lines of enquiry across multiple disciplines as well as providing new insights into the period itself.

About Rhiannon Garth Jones

Rhiannon Garth Jones is a researcher and writer who produced her dissertation at the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions, Aarhus University, under the supervision of Professor Rubina Raja. Her other research interests include late antiquity, early Islam, religions of the Mediterranean, the materiality of light, and the intersection of empire, history, and religion, as well as their reception and manifestations in the modern day.

Time and place for the PhD defence

Monday 27th May, 14.30-17.30, "Foredragssalen" / room 139, building 4206, Moesgård Allé 20, 8270 Højbjerg

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