BOOK REVIEWS

Dwelling Models of Umayyad Madā'in and Quṣūr in Greater Syria, by Giuseppe Labisi. BAR Publishing, 2020. 352pp., with 7 tables and 69 figures, Sc. £74.00. ISBN-13: 9781407357225.

Reviewed by Katarína Mokránová, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, kat.mokranova@gmail.com

In this richly illustrated volume, Labisi provides a thorough architectural synthesis of the dwelling models of Umayyad *madā'in* and *quṣūr* in Greater Syria (Bilād al-Shām). Using the concept of dwelling models as a means for refining contemporary scholarly understanding of early Islamic settlements, Labisi brings together an exhaustive dataset from several *madā'in* (Chapter 2) and *quṣūr* (Chapter 3) within Greater Syria. The book weaves together the findings of current research on the palatial and urban early Islamic settlements into a systematic and cohesive dataset, parts of which would be difficult to find otherwise. The volume is divided into three parts and five chapters, with extensive appendices at the end of the publication containing detailed descriptions and visualized plans of various architectural features.

The book opens with a preface by Alastair Northedge, whose scholarly influence is observable throughout the publication. What follows is the introduction, in which Labisi states the main objectives of his study: (1) to identify Umayyad architectural and living models in Bilād al-Shām; (2) to understand the origins of these models; and (3) to determine the influence of Islamic tradition on the Umayyad housing concept. Here, Labisi introduces the two influential models used for the analysis of the Umayyad dwelling units throughout the book—the five-room-unit model (i.e. Syrian *bayt*), and *banā al-Hīris* (i.e. Persian *bayt* or three-room-unit fronted by a *portico*), both of which were utilised within the newly established settlement types, *madā'in* (“cities”) and *quṣūr* (“palaces”).

The first part (Chapter 1) covers the early Islamic settlement phenomenon and introduces the architecture-specific terminological concepts that are used in the rest of the book. In this section, Labisi presents his arguments and draws on the influences of the eastern pre-Islamic architecture on the architectural settings of public living spaces within (mostly) urban settlements in Greater Syria. Furthermore, Labisi argues that the typology of the newly founded Umayyad *madā'in* displays an architectural scheme of classical origin but remains uniquely adapted to Umayyad exigencies.

The second part of the book contains two chapters (Chapter 2 and 3), that both present a wide array of *madā'in* and *quṣūr* settlements, respectively. Labisi demonstrates how these echoed

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the architectural schemes of the imperial predecessors of the early caliphate but were, at the same time, uniquely transformed through the usage of specific housing models (five-room-unit and *banā al-Hīris*). In Chapter 2, the *madā'in* settlements of 'Anjar, Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Sharqī and Amman are extensively analysed, starting off with the history of research at the site, its historical context, a detailed site description, and the settlement models associated with the site under discussion. All of these are neatly summarised in a conclusion and supplemented by relevant figures and discussions relevant to the main arguments. Although Chapter 3 on *quṣūr* settlements offers more case studies than the previous chapter, it provides fewer contextual details about the selected group of *qaṣr* settlements. Eleven Umayyad *quṣūr* each receive a short description of their location, size and topography. The chapter continues with the analysis of the “five-room-units” of *quṣūr*, proposing how the size and dimensions of these units, and their gradual increase in size over time, can be used for classifying their chronological evolution.

The third part opens with Chapter 4 on the architectural and residential elements that constitute Umayyad buildings at *madā'in* and *quṣūr*, such as vestibules, courtyards, audience halls, five-room units, and hybrid models of *banā al-Hīris*. Here, Labisi discusses how and why these elements differ or resemble one another at *madā'in* and *quṣūr* settlements. Chapter 5 delves into the context of Umayyad residential units through the lenses of pre-Islamic Arab and Near Eastern traditions and Islamic domestic heritage. Each of the newly introduced case-studies outside of Greater Syria is briefly described, and Labisi draws our attention to the identified architectural models, their origins, and their influence in the elaboration of models derived from the pre-Islamic tradition and how these together conceptualised the idea of what he calls a “traditional Islamic house.” This chapter is of value because it outlines avenues for future research on the residential models of the early Islamic period and displays the author's self-awareness of the limited scope of the volume.

Overall, this publication is a refreshing take on Islamic architecture and its engagement with other sources. The principal shortcoming of this book is the limited space devoted to a more in-depth synthesis of the various strands of the author's interpretation of Umayyad architecture. For a book of over 300 pages, there are fewer than 90 pages of (heavily illustrated) text. The book would benefit from a more contextual discussion on the similarities and differences of architectural features between *madā'in* and *quṣūr*, and by including more than the current three *madā'in* as case-studies to strengthen the overall argument. Likewise, the discussion on how the Islamic traditional values of privacy, modesty, and hospitality formed the spatial realities of Umayyad dwellings, is handled in a form too limited in scope (pp. 77–84). Labisi, however, does not shy away from admitting that his study should not be considered as a final product, but rather as a stepping stone towards a greater understanding of the early Islamic settlement phenomena. Labisi writes about astonishingly complex architectural features in Bilād al-Shām, drawing on a variety of written and archaeological sources. In doing so, he frames the Umayyad architecture within the larger socio-cultural context in which the Muslim tradition and elite patronage played a significant role in the formation of new dwelling styles in the region of Greater Syria.

Regarding the overall volume, there is not much comparable literature in the field of Islamic Archaeology that treats the early Islamic dwelling models in such a broad, yet systematic and detailed way as the book under review here. With that in mind, this publication fully deserves to be considered as an important contribution to the field, and as a work to turn back to for comprehensive information on Umayyad architecture.