

# **Zoomorphic Iconography and the Metamorphosis of Ibex Stucco Decorations inside Umayyad Castles in the Early 8th Century CE**

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**Abstract:** *This paper delves deeply into the symbol of the ibex and its profound iconographic metamorphosis. The central focus is whether examining existing stucco sculptures, from the Iranian Style “Out of Place” to Umayyad sculptural embellishment, can illuminate the early popularity of the ibex. The portrayal of this animal in the stuccoes from various Near Eastern sites spanning a millennium confirms its revered status, offering profound insights into the cosmology of ancient Near Eastern peoples. The parallels with the mainstream of Iranian stucco decoration are clear, although not close enough to justify more than this broad deduction. The early appearance of the ibex carries a weighty symbolic message: Samarran ware consistently depicts this caprid with long, branch-like antlers, symbolizing the Tree of Life or Sacred Tree. This symbolism is further exemplified by a piece from the Iranian Plateau, c4500 BC, where the antler trees dominate the entire motif. In other words, the ibex – in the North Mesopotamian and the Iranian plateau – emerges fully formed, carrying an already well-developed symbol of fertility. The study also uncovers a pivotal moment in ancient Islamic art in Umayyad castles, where a new technique emerges, giving birth to three-dimensional figures of ibex heads depicted in profile and executed in high relief in stucco.*

**Keywords:** Zoomorphic, Metamorphosis, Iconography, Stucco, Ibex, Umayyads.

## ***Introduction***

The study of stucco design on hundreds of preserved samples from the ancient Near East reveals one animal’s early popularity: the ibex.

The treatment this animal received, for example, on stucco from a wide range of Near Eastern sites over a thousand years, paints a clear picture of the metamorphosis of its revered status while providing us with possible clues towards an ancient world cosmology.

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A quick examination of the ibex's appearance on Paleolithic bone carvings indicates the animal's long-standing importance as a cultural emblem. The ibex's extinction in the fourth millennium B.C. represents a watershed moment in Near Eastern cultural life.

This study shows examples of ibex concerning fertility and astronomical symbols in Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt. The relationship between ibex, the moon, and fertility appeared at least since prehistory (20.000 B.C.) in European culture and the ancient Near since 10,000 B.C. at least, such as at Kilwa (near the Jordan-Saudi Arabian border), in the 6th millennium BC. Depicted in Tepe Giyan and Tepe Hissar (Iran), and appeared on Samarran ware (Iraq) in the 6th millennium B.C., represented extensively in ancient Egyptian sculptures and reliefs in the 2nd and 1st millennium B.C.

The study clarified that in pre-Islamic culture, the metamorphosis of an ibex in stucco was revered and considered a symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation, so the shape of the prow and stern of divine and funerary boats were depicted in the form of an ibex head or horn to lead the deceased in the afterlife, symbolizing its ability to climb routes through the desert, guaranteeing a peaceful and safe passage to the other world and showing the proper path to the gods.

The researcher also notes that a new technique marks the turning point of ancient Islamic art in Umayyad castles for creating three-dimensional figures of ibex heads, depicted in profile and executed in high relief in stucco.

Ibex, or Steinbock, are gorgeous mountain-dwelling goats. These unique creatures are recognized for their spectacular horns, agility on steep terrain, and ability to thrive in harsh alpine habitats. Ibex are found in hilly areas throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa.

## Sources

The Ibex in pre-Islamic Arabia can be studied using various sources, including rock art, hunting depictions in relief panels, pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions, classical Arabic literature, anthropological data, desert kites, and archaeological investigations. The dry areas of the Middle East and North Africa are home to the Nubian ibex (*Capra ibex nubiana*). It is defined as a species of wild goat whose ancestral range encompassed Africa east of the Nile, the Arabian Peninsula, and the southern Levant. The Asian variant even reaches Mongolia in the east and Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>. Because the ibex prefers to

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<sup>1</sup> B.J. Collins, *A history of the animal world in the ancient Near East* (Handbook of Oriental Studies: The Near and Middle East, 64), Leiden, Brill, 2002, p. 13.

live in severe mountainous terrain, it is generally regarded as one of the most challenging game animals to pursue.

The ibex was the most documented mammal in pre-Islamic Arabia<sup>2</sup>, specifically in ancient Yemen (Fig.1). It is evidenced widely in inscriptions and rock art and served as a symbol of the moon deity in ancient South Arabia<sup>3</sup> (Fig.2).



**Fig. 1:** Frieze with a Lion and a Leopard Attacking Animals, Yemen



**Fig. 2:** Limestone frieze, Yemen

The ibex was most referenced in ancient South Arabian inscriptions as a game animal. The traditional ibex hunt in *Ḥaḍramawt*, which some have believed dates to the pre-Islamic period, is especially relevant to understanding the ibex in ancient Yemen. Several authors have thoroughly investigated this ritual hunt<sup>4</sup>.

In the beginning, we must also say a few words for The Samaritan Ibex. Ernst Herzfeld, who guided the excavation of Samarra from 1911 to

<sup>2</sup> Alessandra Avanzini, *Some thoughts on ibex on plinths in early South Arabian art*. *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* Volume 16, Issue 2, 2005, pp. 144–153.

<sup>3</sup> Robert B. Serjeant, *South Arabian hunt*, London, Luzac, 1976, pp. 77-79.

<sup>4</sup> M. Rodionov, *The Ibex Hunt Ceremony in Hadramawt Today*, in R. L. Bidwell, G. Rex Smith, J. R. Smart (Eds.), *New Arabian Studies* (123–129), University of Exeter Press, 1994, pp. 20-21.

1913, classified this animal as a ‘Steinbock,’ or ibex<sup>5</sup>, and it is worth noting that this animal was one of the first to appear on upper Mesopotamian pottery. Herzfeld classified pottery into nine groups. Hassuna’s Samarran ceramics were classified, including jars and bowls of various sizes. The animals listed included two fish, three birds, and thirteen ibexes. The ibex was exclusively discovered on service bowls, which may indicate that these serving bowls were utilized for essential events. So, what does the ‘horns’ motif in Samarra symbolize then? There are at least two ways to interpret it. Firstly, scholars believe prehistoric farmers associated animals with antlers, such as goats and deer, with their expectation of rain<sup>6</sup>. The pottery from Tell Hassuna<sup>7</sup> shows four wild goats in a circle, with clouds raining between them<sup>8</sup>. The plate from Samarra, shown below, wild goats in a cruciform formation around a diamond, perhaps farmland; on the other plate, the goats are around a tree. In the image of the other plate, the goats are reduced to triangles. On the other plate, there are triangles with horns or horned heads.

The pottery of the Tripolitan culture also contains similar cruciform compositions. However, the “Rain Ibexes” are responsible for the rain here. According to Rybakov, they are an anachronism from the society of hunters and gatherers, when the goddess half-woman half-deer was responsible for the abundant catch. Neolithic farmers, however, reinterpreted the deer goddess as the bearer of rain<sup>9</sup>.

All living things, regardless of age or location, sustain themselves from water. Since the beginning of time, man has recognized its significance and been concerned about its scarcity, mainly if he depends on rain. Religious rituals were undertaken in ancient communities to ensure that rain would always fall. Ibex and rain have been associated from prehistoric times, as evidenced by old Near Eastern antiquities<sup>10</sup>.

Throughout the prehistoric Near East, the ibex was one of the first creatures to be depicted on pottery, whether in Samarra, Sialk, Tepe Giyan, Susa, or Tepe Hissar, among other localities.

An ibex featuring the Tree of Life design is discovered at Tepe Giyan, approximately 4500 B.C. With its back to the tree, the ibex glances to

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Herzfeld, Band V. Ausgrabungen von Samarra, Die Vorgeschichtlichen Töpfereien von Samarra, Berlin, 1930, pp. 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> Elena Antonova, *Essays on Culture of Ancient Tillers of Hither and Central Asia: Experience of Reconstruction of World Perception*, Moscow, 1984, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Braidwood, Seton Lloyd, Fuad Safar, *Tell Hassuna Excavations by the Iraq Government Directorate General of Antiquities in 1943 and 1944*, Journal of Near Eastern Studies Volume 4, Number 4, Oct. 1945, pp. 255-89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/542914>.

<sup>8</sup> Boris Aleksandrovich Rybakov, *Cosmogony and mythology of Eneolithic farmers*. -- SA, 1965, NO. 2, p.14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammed F. Omar, Some thoughts on the religious role of Ibex in Ancient Near East, Article 2022, p. 461, [https://mafs.journals.ekb.eg/article\\_268492\\_7486c7ffd400c2cf915978bd6bbc56c1.pdf](https://mafs.journals.ekb.eg/article_268492_7486c7ffd400c2cf915978bd6bbc56c1.pdf).

its right, seeing the waxing crescent formed by the almost touching horns<sup>11</sup>. The ibex would soon disappear, but only after a distinctive motif of the ibex inverted would emerge, as shown in Stage Three<sup>12</sup>.

One of the most enduring and widely distributed images from the ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean is a composition of two wild goats (*capras*) arranged around a tree, known as a sacred tree, which is a date palm tree or conifer<sup>13</sup>. It is noteworthy that in specific patterns, this composition features an ibex with the tree of life<sup>14</sup>. It may have been passed down as a component of a mountain culture connecting the peoples of Susa throughout the Diyala region and into Syria from at least the fourth until the end of the second millennium B.C. It had originated in Iran in the Susiana Plain and was used by numerous Near Eastern cultures. It was dispersed over the Near<sup>15</sup>.

According to scholars, another source of ibex-related symbolism would be cosmology or celestial symbols in Near Eastern art. The motif of the Taurus versus Leo fight, the Lion attacking the Ibex. According to Hartner, these themes represent various solstitial points, and interestingly, the pair of goats is not related to the representation of the Ibex<sup>16</sup>.

Hartner shows how looking at the MUL.APIN tablets<sup>17</sup>, the Goat is regarded as the Scorpion's *paranatellon*<sup>18</sup>. The bright Vega in the constellation Lyra is linked to the Ibex. The heliacal rising of Vega is around twenty-five days ahead of that of Antares, the brightest star in Scorpio. Consequently, the autumnal equinox is associated with the ibex motif, portrayed with the sacred tree<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Contenau and Ghirshman, 1935, pl. 51. Tepe Giyan sherd ca 4500 B.C. Many pictures of the ibex with and without the Tree of Life were found at Tepe Giyan's lowest level, which dates to around 5000 B.C., mainly in the form of sherds: Ibid. Plates 47-51.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Dibon-Smith, *The Ibex: History of a Near Eastern Time Symbol*, [https://www.academia.edu/15735124/The\\_Ibex\\_as\\_an\\_Iconographic\\_Symbol\\_in\\_the\\_ancient\\_Near\\_East](https://www.academia.edu/15735124/The_Ibex_as_an_Iconographic_Symbol_in_the_ancient_Near_East), 2016, p.21.

<sup>13</sup> Mohammed F. Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>14</sup> L. Bushnell, *The Wild Goat and Tre Icon and its particular significance for ancient Cyprus*, Postgraduate Cypriot Archaeology Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting of Young Researchers on Cypriot Archaeology, Department of Classics, Trinity College Dublin, 21-22 October 2005, BAR 1803, 2008, pp. 21-22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 65-69.

<sup>16</sup> Willy Hartner, "The earliest history of the constellations in Near Est and the motif of the lion-bull combat", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 24, 1965, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> R. Watson, W. Horowitz, "Preliminary Material", in *Writing Science before the Greeks* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2011) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004202306.i-223.2>, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Willy Hartner, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

Similarly, the Taurus image, flanked by the sacred tree, signifies the spring equinox. The summer solstice is symbolized by the Lion attacking the Ibex<sup>20</sup>.

We have therefore followed the development of the ibex from its employment as a lunar emblem in prehistoric times to the sudden realignment of the night skies approximately 4000 BC, which gave the Ibex the Winter solstice, the Lion the Summer solstice, and the Bull the Spring equinox. Simultaneously, the ibex detached itself from the shorter lunar cycle that had probably been the first human calendar, and the moon was linked with the bull<sup>21</sup>. According to Avanzini, the archaic period and the west-central region of Yemen are characterized by a specific way of depicting the ibex, one of the creatures most closely associated with the fearful imagery and aesthetic preferences of the ancient people of South Arabia. The animal is motionless in these representations, which are occasionally isolated and repeated. The animal and the platform it stands on are placed within a rectangular, geometric frame that either truly exists or is easily imaginable, and the horns serve an important decorative role. The artistic vocabulary of such iconography requires a lengthy gestation time, which, given our current state of knowledge, must have started around the late second millennium<sup>22</sup>. With Hartner's theory, we have seen how certain constellations have a very ancient value and, if we base ourselves on the heavens of the fourth millennium B.C., how their symbolism, traceable in many pictographic sources, is to be associated with the solstitial and equinoctial points, and how, in addition, the motif of animal fights or the sacred tree is connected with an exact celestial meaning<sup>23</sup>. One example of a painted hemispherical dome is at Qasr Amra, the desert castle Al-Walid II constructed in the eighth century. It's a significant occasion for us because it shows how ancient astronomical paintings were transmitted to the Islamic world and highlights a critical distinction between decorative principles from the Middle Ages and the Modern Era.

### ***Description, comparison, and analysis of ibex stucco fragments from the Sasanian to Umayyad periods***

Southeast of Damghan, Tepe Hissar is one of Iran's most significant stucco sites from the Sassanian period. A lovely, sparsely decorated Sasanian palace with a variety of motif fragments was in this Tepe. These studies are

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed F. Omar, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>22</sup> Alessandra Avanzini, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art", *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4, no. 2 (1933), pp. 228–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1522803>.

instrumental as they help us comprehend the stucco art of this era. Regarding style, Tepe Hissar's stuccoes date back to the fifth century A.D. Although Tepe Hissar's animal stuccoes are distinct, they share stylistic and temporal similarities with Kish stuccoes. In terms of period, Tepe Hissar's animal figures are modeled after Hajiabad stuccos. They replicated the animal stucco style of Hajiabad. Tepe Hissar's stucco style has a strong influence on Chal Tarkhan stuccoes; some Tepe Hissar stucco traits are like those seen in Ctesiphon, Taque-Bostan reliefs, and a plaster plaque claimed to Susa<sup>24</sup>. The predominant technique used by the Sasanids did not consist of freehand mortar work but of producing square or rectangular tiles of various sizes on site, in series, and using molds<sup>25</sup>. The technique mainly employed by the Sasanians consisted of not working the stucco freely but producing off-site, in series, and using molds. These square or rectangular tiles of various sizes were then arranged to form continuous friezes and wall cladding panels. We can see this stucco tile from the Sasanian period, with the two ibexes standing towards the Tree of Life (Fig.3).



**Fig. 3:** Relief plaque with confronted ibexes, Iran

In Near Eastern cultures, ibexes are depicted standing on their hind legs to eat the leaves or berries of the 'Tree of Life' (Fig.4).

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<sup>24</sup> Seyyed Rasool, Mousavi Haji, Mohammad Eghbal Chehri, "Animal Figures of Sasanian Stucco in Tepe Hissar", *Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences*, Vol. 2 No. 2, December 2013, pp. 32-45.

<sup>25</sup> Françoise Demange, *Fastes d'un empire oublié (224-642)*, Paris, Editions Paris-Musées – Findakly, 2006, pp. 51-61.





**Fig. 4:** Ibex Eating, Iran

Other plaster fragments with stucco elements, such as a rectangular plaque with no margin, have been obtained from the Sassanid palace in Tepe Hissar. It represents a ram or ibex with two half-palmettes. The half-palmette figure appears on the right side of the fragment as a little stem with two drooping leaves<sup>26</sup> (Fig.5). A four-sepal half-palmette rises behind this figure, with the upper sepal point under the ibex's mouth.



**Fig. 5:** Plaster plaque with a ram or ibex figure of Tepe Hissar

The hollow, elongated, and pointed ear of the ibex is carved in the center, with the tip resting on the horn. Several parallel vertical incised lines indicate the position of the ibex's long beard below the neck and chin. Below the beard, two long twisted hairs hang from the neck in a striking six-bar motif. Around the neck of the ram is a collar-like ring with two thin strips

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<sup>26</sup> S. Ayazi, S. Miri (ed.), *Decorative Architectural Stucco from the Parthian and Sassanid eras*, Tehran, National Museum of Iran Publ., 2007, p. 26.



and a row of round pearls in the center. A square structure on the back of the neck and the thoracic cavity could be the end of two hanging bands<sup>27</sup> (Fig.5). All these elements related to the gift of power that would lead to development later in pre-Islamic art in the Umayyad dynasty.

The study of stucco motifs also from the Sassanid period has indicated which incarnations of the god Bahram were most significant; according to religious texts, the ten incarnations of the god Bahram also include the figure of the ibex<sup>28</sup>.

All works dealing with the components of Umayyad art discuss the phenomenon of borrowing from the East via the Sassanians on the one hand and from the West through Byzantium on the other<sup>29</sup>.

One example of this kind of art is the Umayyad Palace at Khirbat al-Mafjar in Jericho (known as Hisham's Palace) (724-748 AD), which is decorated with a complex of stucco sculptures (now in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem) that included figures of men and women, animals and hybrid creatures, and head friezes. Robert W. Hamilton, who excavated the palace between 1936 and 1948, discovered and restored them<sup>30</sup>.

To judge by the shapes of the animal bodies, the source of inspiration is Eastern – mainly Iranian. At Khirbat al-Mafjar, as in Sassanian representations (Fig.5), the bodies are elongated, blocky, complete, and rotund in the rump and lower belly section, with the hair marked by hatched and engraved lines in various areas; the couchant posture is identical as well, as is the placing of the joint of the leg at a too high level as if extending from the neck. There is also a similarity in the shape of the heads: the head of the ibex and the head of the roe deer at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Fig.6, Fig.7), as well as the one at Chal-Tarkhan-Eshqabad, from the Sassanian period with the exact stucco figure of the ibex (Fig.8), has a long and massive neck and a glued-on eye of the type described above<sup>31</sup>. There is a difference between the three examples in their section and in the transition from the forehead to the jaw, which is molded with a lighter touch in the Sassanian version. However, the pricked-up ears of the ibex at Khirbat al-Mafjar add a unique charm to the animal<sup>32</sup> (Fig.6). This significant group of ibexes appears in two different styles on the façade of the Khirbat al-Mafjar's bath-house porch and its

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<sup>27</sup> Seyyed Rasool, Haji Mousavi, Mohammad Eghbal Chehri, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-45.

<sup>28</sup> M. E. Chehri, "The Incarnations of the God Bahram on the Stuccoes of the Sassanian Period", *Pazhoheshha-ye Bastan Shenasi Iran*, 12(35), pp. 127-158, 2023 (Doi: 10.22084/nb.2022.25014.2387).

<sup>29</sup> Rina Talgam, *The Stylistic Origins of Umayyad Sculpture and Architectural Decoration*, Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, Part I: Text, 2004, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Siyana S. Georgieva, *Khirbat al-Mafjar and the Art of Stucco (7th-8th c.)*, Chapter of Master Thesis, Figures modeled in stucco at Khirbat al-Mafjar, Padua, University of Padua, 2023, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Hana Taragan, *The Peopled Scrolls at the Umayyad Palace in Jericho*, Department of Art History, Tel Aviv University, Assaph, 31,1998, pp. 93-108.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

entrance room, presenting our topic. According to Taragan, the bodies of the ibexes are executed in high relief and depicted in profile, and their three-dimensional heads face frontward.



**Fig. 6:** Kish, Stucco relief of couchant animal



**Fig. 7:** Detail Ibex, *Khirbat al-Majfar*



**Fig. 8:** The Palace entrance Hall, *Peopledscrolls*, a fragment

From the analysis, we note that Figure 6 and Figure 7 differ from the stucco used in three-dimensional or high-relief sculpture. The stucco sculpture of Khirbat al-Mafjar includes a large group of crouching ibexes that appear in two different styles on the facade of the bath-house porch (Fig.9, Fig.10, Fig.11) and its entrance room (Fig.12, Fig.14)<sup>33</sup>.



**Fig. 9:** Detail Ibex, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*



**Fig. 10:** Detail Ibex, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*

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<sup>33</sup> Rina Talgam, *op. cit.*, p. 60.



**Fig. 11:** Ibexes in plaster, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*



**Fig. 12:** Detail Ibex with the athlete, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*

The ibexes' bodies are executed in high relief and represented in profile, with three-dimensional heads facing frontward. Ibexes with similar size and posture were discovered at specific Sassanian sites (Fig.13)<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem.*



**Fig. 13:** Carved Stucco Tile depicting a ram, Iraq

The bathhouse entrance room at Khirbat al-Mafjar features ibexes that stand out from their Sassanian counterparts due to their lively facial expressions and the movement elicited by elevating the hind body<sup>35</sup> (Fig.14).



**Fig. 14:** Detail Ibex, *Khirbat al-Mafjar*

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem.*

However, according to Talgam, the ibex statues on the bathhouse's facade are reminiscent of the Sassanian style, with their representation of four legs gathered beneath a heavy, rigid body and their stylized depiction of various anatomical details, like the marking of the belly-to-back transition with a straight line and a row of short lines at right angles to it. The way the ibexes are portrayed on Sassanian panels and low-relief medallions is the source of the stylized version of the ibexes 'orns without the need for foreshortening<sup>36</sup>.

Hamilton gives one example of bearded ibexes kneeling on the cornice across the façade of the bath porch: "We documented pieces of eight of these monsters, which may have once numbered ten or more. Each one has a triple pendant hanging from a ribbon around its neck; small traces of buff coloration on one imply they may have originally been painted.<sup>37</sup>".

As Hamilton points out, these animals are frequently depicted flying or falling transfixed in Sasanian royal hunting scenes. With their ribbons, they resemble pets in this context; they are also commonly represented in fabrics and on seals<sup>38</sup>. With one foreleg elevated at the knee and one rear leg spread, the stance is seen on seals depicting gazelle, ibex, and hare, with the heads turned to face the front<sup>39</sup>.

According to Hamilton: "Looking up from the floor, spectators would have seen these beasts crouching in the continuous file at the feet of the girls and athletes in their niches. And just as those may have evoked thoughts of the entertainment to be expected in the baths or palace, I imagine the figures of wild game were offered as a reminder of the pleasures of the field"<sup>40</sup>.

This was egregiously demonstrated in Hamilton's research, a row of kneeling rams or ibexes rested on the top of the double acanthus frame, opposite to the two smaller niches, of which pieces of eight or more remained: The remains of these monsters revealed that they were modeled in plaster and applied in soft lumps against a pre-existing sculpted ornament, which we identified with the stucco panels surmounting the frame. The central panel features four monsters, two facing right and two facing left. One of the beasts can be placed precisely on the ascending curve of the arch on the left side as from its<sup>41</sup> (Fig.15, Fig.16).

<sup>36</sup> Jens Kröger, *Sasanidischer Stuckdekor*, Philipp Von Zabern, Mainz Am Rhein, 1982, pp. 148-186.

<sup>37</sup> Robert William Hamilton, *Khirbat al Mafjar An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 240.

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien*, Felsdenkmale aus Irans Heldenzeit Berlin, Dietrich Reimer, 1920.

<sup>39</sup> Robert William Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 240; Ernest Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien*.

<sup>40</sup> Robert William Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.





**Fig. 15:** Ibex with athlete, *Hisham's Palace (Khirbat al-Maffjar)*



**Fig. 16:** Ibex with athlete, *Hisham's Palace (Khirbat al-Maffjar)*

The presence and prominence in the bathing square of a statue known as the caliph, the lion pedestal in the Khirbat al-Mafjar, and the ibexes, all of which are attributes of Sasanian kingship and appear to implicate a noble owner, clearly influence the historical interpretation of the building<sup>42</sup>.

Hamilton points out that the Umayyad sculptors were following the example of the tradition of Persia several centuries earlier, where, as he points out: "The paradox here consisted of introducing relief as a substitute for painting and doing it without adjustment to the architectural setting. In this, the Umayyad sculptors were following an example of some centuries' standing from Persia, where, as Herzfeld has remarked, the famous rock sculptures and the subsequent dependent works in plaster were an interpretation in relief of the dominant art of painting"<sup>43</sup>.

The definition of ornamental details such as the eyes or manes of ibexes represented as a novelty in Palestinian or Syrian architectural contexts is sufficient evidence of a very close cultural-historical relationship between these ibex figures and the art of stucco relief in Iraq and Persia<sup>44</sup>. The carved stucco figures of ibex found in Khirbat al-Mafjar display those decorative motifs, and the technique used is precisely the same as those found in other Umayyad structures such as Qasr al-Hallabat and Qasr al-Mshatta.

According to Arce, the stucco plaster is mainly composed of a mixture of gypsum and lime in an approximate proportion of one to three or two to three. The technique is also standard Umayyad: the decoration is sculpted and modeled directly into the hardening plaster with a blade or stucco knife (no molds or stamps were used) before drying and hardening completely. A few eyes or holes drilled in specific places reinforce the *chiaroscuro* effect. This craft, therefore, has a more expressive quality than mold-impressed rigid plaster ornamentation<sup>45</sup>.

Regarding its prehistoric past, we have seen how the ibex appeared in full bloom on the Near Eastern plains, its crescent shape signifying its long link with the moon or its horns already holding the Tree of Life. It is currently only speculative how long back in human history this animal, or its horns, was considered sacred. But it might be essential to remember that the research of lunar notation on Paleolithic bones turned up interesting information that the first animal discovered in connection with the annotated

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 239.

<sup>44</sup> Siyana S. Georgieva, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>45</sup> Ignacio Arce, The Umayyad Congregational Mosque and the Souq Square Complex at Amman Citadel. Architectural Features and Urban Significance, Proceedings of the 2nd International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East 22-26 May 2000, Copenhagen, Vol. 2, Edited by Ingolf Thuesen with the assistance of Alan George Walmsley Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna / Eisenbrauns Bologna, 2016, p. 121.

bones was an ibex, and why it wasn't associated with the Umayyade tradition.

Even with the ruins of the Qasr al-Mshatta façade, we can constantly see our ibex hiding and feeding among the leaves of the tree of life, symbolizing the fertility metaphor. At this point, we can excellently demonstrate that the turning point of ancient Islamic art in Umayyad castles is marked by a new technique that creates the three-dimensional figures of ibex heads, depicted in profile, and executed in high relief in stucco.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the small number of ibex stuccoes found at Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Mshatta, the diversity of motifs and the importance of the studies are clear. Animal motifs, such as ibexes, gazelles, and rams, are particularly significant for accurately dating Umayyad buildings. The animal figures studied in the stuccoes of Khirbat al-Mafjar and Qasr al-Mshatta belonged to those fashionable animal motifs, and the Umayyad artists were particularly interested in these creatures, which may be observed in other creative works of this era or, better, in connection with the Sassanid heritage. This demonstrates the ibex's symbolic significance in the theological and social ideas of the Umayyads. As we have seen in our story, the holly, a symbol of fertility, has several designs adorning its top. Combining the Tree of Life with animals is assumed to symbolize luck and fertility, especially regarding the significance of animals such as the ibex. Animals and flowers predominate in the arabesque motifs, a Islamic architecture and art hallmark. Indeed, ibexes are created in architectural accents<sup>46</sup>.

It is possible to locate an object's dating and determine the regions and periods in which the iconographic element was created. This can identify iconographic elements unique to the modeled stucco objects of a particular area during pre-Islamic history, particularly during the Umayyad period.

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<sup>46</sup> Masoud Mohammadzadeh, Hajjar Pour, Ali Hossein, *An analytic study on architectural decorations in early Islamic architecture*, European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences, 2014, vol.3, No.1, pp. 108-116.

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