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## **Dwelling Transformation and Evolution of Customs after the Islamic Conquest in Near Eastern Cities**

**This paper develops a typological study of courtyard houses found in Near Eastern cities after the Islamic conquest of 636. The study of dwelling transformation may shed new light on the identification of customs of natives and newcomers during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Near East.**

### **Introduction**

The Islamic conquest was initiated by Muhammad and after his death in 632, the territories captured continued to expand from Arabia to the Near East. For historians, the transfer of Byzantine territories to Muslim authority marks the passage from Late Antiquity to the Islamic period in the Near East. From a social point of view, during the short timespan between the beginning of the Islamic conquest, starting with ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb (r. 634–644), in this region and the shifting of the caliphate to Iraq in 750, the former Byzantine cities became areas of cultural interaction and mingling between natives and Arabian newcomers. The increase of contributions from social sciences such as history, ethnography or linguistics, give different perspectives to everyday life and the first steps of newcomers in Byzantine urban society. Through excavation programmes carried out in the cities, concrete evidence emerges from the archaeological data, which is being interpreted by the «household archaeology» movement born in 1980. This school of thought needed the humanities to contribute to a comprehensive study of dwellings. The most recent book in this field was published in 2012 and entitled *New Perspectives on Household Archaeology*, in which B. Parker and C. Foster describe the efforts of archaeologists to make scientific data gathered in the field relevant to the understanding of everyday life.

Firstly, a brief synthesis of «household archaeology» leads to a way of adapting this school of thought to the study of urban dwellings in the Near East during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. Secondly, several houses excavated in Near Eastern cities may constitute a corpus of «central courtyard» houses, constructed between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and still occupied in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The listing and description of architecture and domestic features tends to confirm that the dwellings constructed before and after the Islamic conquest show an evolution of customs.

## Adapting Household Archaeology Issues to the Context of Near Eastern Cities

### What is Household Archaeology?

In a pioneering article R. Wilk and W. Rathje sought to define dwelling studies from an archaeological point of view and to evoke how social sciences are implied in household studies: «Then, working in archaeology, economic history and historical demography, we will be able to build more complete models of variety and long-term evolutionary change.» (Wilk/Rathje 1982: 637). This fundamental article is mostly based on prehistoric examples, nonetheless every historical period is concerned: even if written sources exist they remain silent on daily life (Allison 1999: 3). That is why most of the studies dealing with the household incline to go further than the simple presentation of archaeological data. Specific issues regarding urban dwelling of the Roman and Byzantine periods were published in 2007 by K. Galor and Th. Waliszewski with the title *From Antioch to Alexandria: Recent studies in domestic architecture*. They state: «The archaeological remains not only provide us with the elements necessary to reconstruct living and working spaces in an increasingly accurate three-dimensional manner, but they also inform us about aspects of daily life that concern the people and sometimes animals that moved within these spaces» (Galor/Waliszewski 2007: 23). For the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods the documentation is scattered and unequal with, on the one hand, recent excavations offering a careful record and analysis of archaeological data and, on the other hand, the older archaeological reports where documentation is often reduced to the plan and presentation of the small finds, with no mention of stratigraphy.

One of the theories regarding household archaeology is that a global study, including recorded elements and *in situ* material, must provide evidence of everyday life (Allison 1999: 5). Indeed, several earthquakes dated to around 749 occurred in the Jordan Valley (Ambraseys 2009: 230) and created destruction deposits with many artefacts and other remains found *in situ*. During the excavations in Pella, skeletons of some inhabitants and of

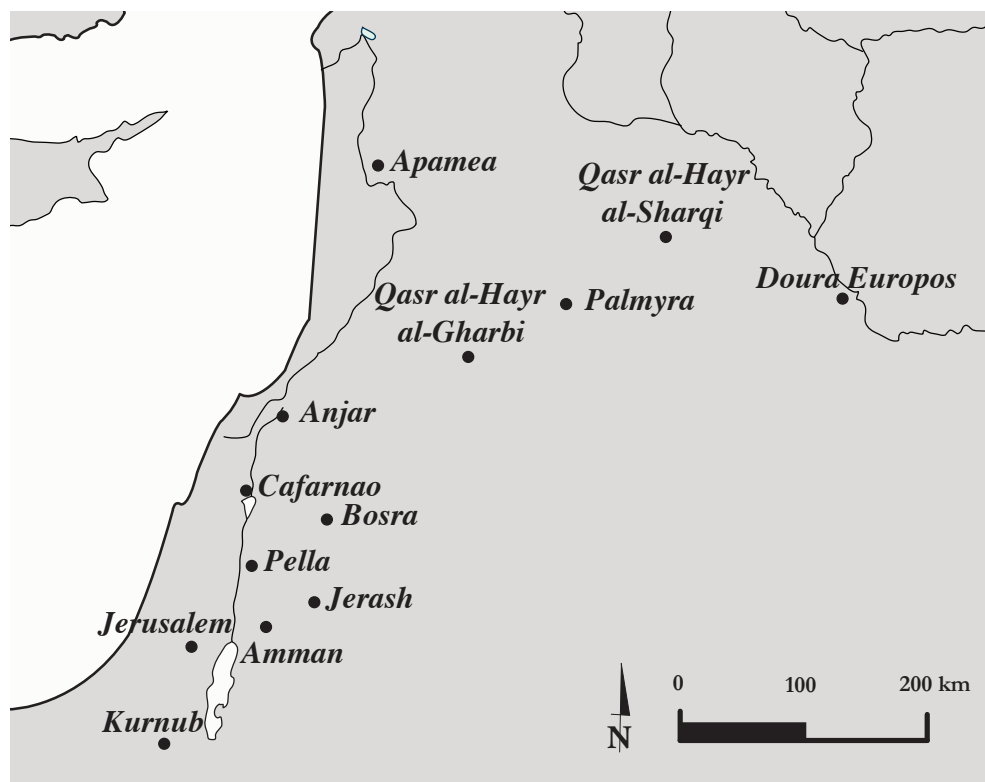
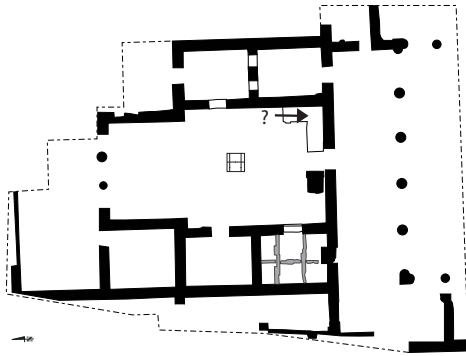
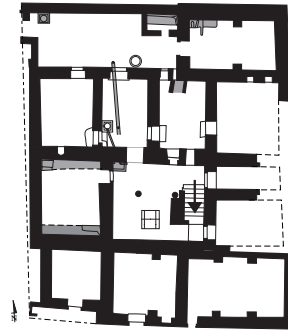


Fig. 1. Map of the area under study with cities mentioned.

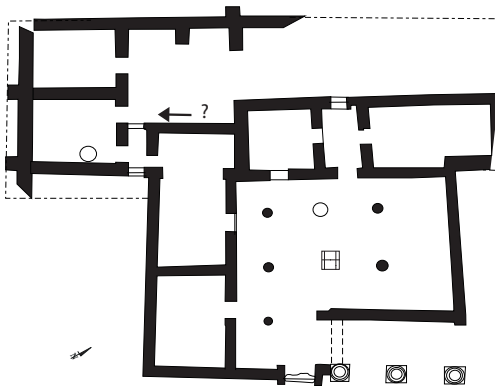
cows and horses came to light in «House G». Far from poor farmers, the owners' belongings attest to the «well-off inhabitants carrying precious coinage and wearing expensive clothes» (Walmsley 2007a: 520). In the case of the 'Amman citadel, the houses excavated near the Umayyad palace may have belonged to a family that was perhaps linked to the aristocracy of the provincial government (Northedge 1992: 48), but the artefacts discovered are quite common. Unfortunately, examples like these are rare but reveal how far the material culture can inform about the everyday life of inhabitants. In the present state of research, the unequal documentation of the corpus of dwellings pertaining to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries does not enable an accurate relationship between architectural remains and material culture to be established. This paper will not address material culture and will concentrate on architecture.



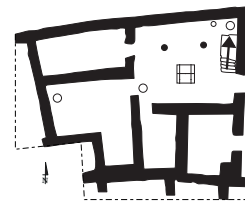
**Apamea: Maison des chapiteaux à consoles**  
(Source: Balty 1984:109)



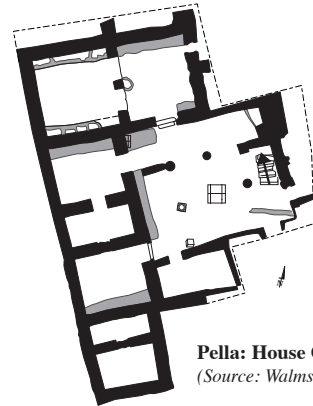
**Jerusalem: "The Monastery"**  
(Source: Mazar 2003:12 Plan 1.2)



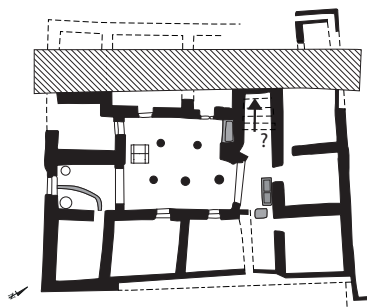
**Palmyra: "Praetorium"**  
(Source: Kowalski 1994: Pl. XXXIV)



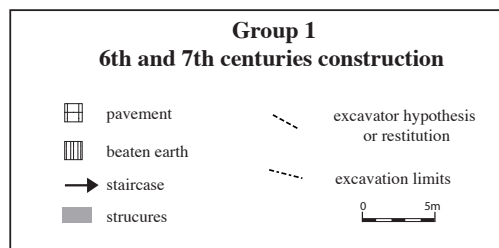
**Cafarnao : Insula II- Courtyard 60**  
(Source: Corbo 1975: Tav. XIII)



**Pella: House G**  
(Source: Walmsley 2007a: 263)



**Jerusalem: Peristyle house**  
(Source: Mazar 2007: Fig 13.1)



**Fig. 2. Houses constructed during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries (Group 1).**



Fig. 3. Houses constructed or transformed during the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Group 2).

## Corpus and Methodology

Despite the disparate data available for the late Antique and Early Islamic periods in the Near East, we took the liberty to review the archaeological analysis of dwellings. The first step is the collection of house plans pertaining to the chronological window from 590 to 750. Due to the polymorphism illustrated in the publications, this study will focus on one type of house: the «central courtyard» house. The methodology of architectural analysis developed here tries to take into account each recorded structural element to define households in order to sketch out daily life. From a typological point of view, the courtyard house consists of several rooms around, and often opening on, the yard. This plan is well known in the Fertile Crescent from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C.E. (Ur, Woolley 1955: 242) to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., like at Doura Europos (Allara 1988: 324). It should be noticed that it is still implemented during Roman and Byzantine times by architects in the Near East mostly in a rural context, but small-scale reproductions of this type of plan is also found in cities (Hirschfeld 1995: 57).

Considering the number of «central courtyard» type houses excavated, pertinent examples are selected, with a mostly complete plan and occupation phase based on archaeological evidence (**fig. 1**). In urban contexts excavators have to deal with several construction phases and often the long lives of antique structures, like for example, the Palmyra «Praetorium» or the «Maison des chapiteaux à consoles» in Apamea, which are partitions of an older, larger house. Sometimes, the most recent layer discovered does not correspond with the occupational phase described here, for instance «Insula F (north)» in Palmyra, which is abandoned only in the 9<sup>th</sup> century but for which the main architectural transformations are dated to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century by the excavator (Gawlikowski 2009: 90). In the case of Jerusalem, the wall of the Umayyad palace creates an 8<sup>th</sup> century *terminus post-quem* for the «Peristyle House» abandonment. The study of material is also instructive in the cases of the Cafarnao «Insula II – Courtyard 60», the so-called «Monastery» in Jerusalem or «Building B-Area GO» in Jerash, where specialists use accurate artefact analysis to highlight occupational phases. Finally, violent destruction, linked to the earthquake, seals the archaeological contexts of the «Museum Site» house (‘Amman), «Building B-Area C» (‘Amman) and «House G» (Pella) just before the end of the Umayyad caliphate. These examples constitute a corpus that can be divided into two chronological groups: the first consists of Byzantine houses whose construction dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries (**fig. 2**) and the second of houses with 8<sup>th</sup> century transformations or construction (**fig. 3**).

Partly due to the analysis of Roman housing space, some scholars tried to describe Byzantine architecture from the perspective of the use of space, but some examples in the identification of reception rooms show a misunderstanding between archaeological finds and architecture (Hirschfeld 1995: 71). Indeed, throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods, welcoming of visitors is considered as a part of social life that occurred in the private space, and its importance is demonstrated mostly through written sources and several pictorial

dining scenes (Vroom 2007: 315). As mentioned above, the link between literary description and archaeological realities do not portray everyday life and actually in the corpus of houses under study the plans do not show any specific space dedicated to welcoming guests. One would expect a particularly wide room for visitors, with benches for sitting and specific decoration. But the study of the materials found shows no trace of furniture such as wooden tables or dining vessel expected by J. Vroom for these spaces (Vroom 2007: 356), nor specific architecture (Galor/Waliszewski 2007: 21). This example shows how literary evidence can lead to over-interpreting a domestic space; as said by P. Allison (Allison 1999: 5): «The problem here is not that archaeological remains cannot provide information on domestic behaviour in the past but rather that archaeological data is not always capable of answering the kinds of questions which anthropologists and social-historians might ask of their own data».

## Analysis of Constructed Features Reflecting the Dwelling Habits

### Architectural Analysis

As explained above, the architectural description must prevail over interpreting the use of space. Actually in the second group there is a specific pattern noticeable in the 8<sup>th</sup> century constructions in 'Amman and Jerash: a central room opening onto two side rooms. This pattern is a small-scale reproduction of the «bayt» described by K. A. C. Creswell (Creswell 1979: 516), which consists of a large room opening on both sides to two other rooms. Former palatial examples are known from area H in the Mleiha fort (UAE), dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Mouton 2012: 208), and to the «Palace of Trajan» in Bosra (4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Piraud-Fournet 2010: 284). The room pattern called «bayt» was developed as a dwelling unit in the Umayyad palatial context (Almagro 1992: 354). Although no specific room pattern has yet been found in Byzantine domestic architecture, the introduction of this small-scale «bayt» room pattern in domestic dwellings leads us to interpret it as characteristic of the newcomers' way of living. This raises the discussion as to whether to attribute this room layout to reception purposes or to a new custom imported in the Near East.

In the «central courtyard type» the yard represents the main part of the plan; this space is as a light-giver for the ground floor and an open space that gathers domestic activities. If one takes a look to the flooring in the corpus of houses, in the first group the pavement is made of stones (**fig. 2**), and often remains in the 8<sup>th</sup> century refurbishment, such as in the examples from Palmyra (**fig. 3**). The stone pavement seems to be a solid construction to take care of rainfall, people or animal traffic, like in Pella (Walmsley 2007b: 262). Contrarily, most examples constructed after the Islamic conquest have a beaten earth floor, giving the



impression of crude flooring despite the number of installations standing in the yard (**fig. 3**). To take this statement further, two hypothesis can be put forward: firstly, that the beaten earth is an intermediate state, awaiting a stone pavement; secondly, that perishable elements are put on the floor during the use of the yard, like mats (*buriyyan*) or carpets (*tanafis*) put on the floor of the room in Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Malik's house in the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Tabari: vol. XXXIV-1373). Descriptions in literary sources are scarce and not very helpful concerning yard flooring: al-Tabari reports that Hisham b. 'Abd al-Malik (691–743) used to sit on a sofa in the courtyard of his house (Tabari: vol. XXVI-1734) but does not describe the floor.

In the first group, there are columns in the yard except in the «Maison aux chapiteaux à consoles» (**fig. 2**). For S. Ellis, the architectural prestige of the peristyle declines during the Byzantine period (Ellis 1988: 565) but even if the decorative program is missing, one may note that the number of columns is adapted to the reduced size of the Byzantine yard, with an average, in the first group, of about 22 m<sup>2</sup>. During the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, one of the transformations is to block the inter-column space of the portico, like in both houses from Palmyra (Gawlikowski 2007: 91), and in several houses in Apamea (Balty 1984: 37, 119). Based on the 8<sup>th</sup> century urban dwellings presented here (**fig. 3**), such as garrison towns (*amsār*) like 'Anjar, the yard appears to be wider (average about 36 m<sup>2</sup>), but devoid of columns (Finster 2003: 211). As far as we can see the portico used during Byzantine times is blocked during later transformations and is often missing in new construction programs in cities. At this stage of the research, one has to conclude that this important antique architectural element is abandoned in urban housing after the Islamic conquest, and that it may imply a the new concept of domestic space. Nonetheless the prestige associated with the colonnade does not disappear during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, as shown in aristocratic residences like Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi (Schlumberger 1939: 340).

In urban contexts, the elevation is often missing, partly due to the abandonment, collapse or later levelling but the stratigraphy may show evidence of an upper storey in the destruction deposits, such as remains of floors, tesserae (Harding 1951: 9), clay bricks, wall paintings, or various artefacts (Walmsley 2007b: 251). Without systematic stratigraphic records, the only evidence for an upper storey is a staircase, and there are examples made of stone in houses in Apamea, Cafarnao, Pella and Jerusalem (**fig. 2**). But in the second group, even if archaeological evidence arises during the excavation for activities on the upper floor, there is no constructed access. Some elements have led excavators to suggest that there was a staircase made of perishable material, for instance in the «Praetorium» (Late Period I) (Kowalski 1994: 42) or in the «Museum Site» house (Northedge 1992: 143). In the case of Palmyra «Insula F», one of the late transformations consisted in blocking the stairs (Gawlikowski 2007: 90), and in other houses, access to the upper floor remains problematical. Nevertheless, examples of staircases constructed in the Umayyad period can be considered as a privilege of palaces or large aristocratic residences in a monumental way,

Site	House name	Date			Yard Area	Water-linked activities				
		6th - 7th construction	8th modification	8th construction	m2	drainpipe	cistern	drain	basin	shower / privy
<b>Cafarnao</b>	Insula II-Courtyard 60	X			11,9	/	/	/	/	/
<b>Jerusalem</b>	"The monastery"	X			9,5	yard	entry	entry + yard	entry + yard	?
<b>Jerusalem</b>	Peristyle House	X			13,93	?	backyard	entry	yard	?
<b>Palmyra</b>	"Praetorium"	X			39,6	/	/	/	/	/
<b>Pella</b>	House G	X			23,2	/	/	yard	/	/
<b>Apamea</b>	Maison des chapiteaux à consoles	X			36	/	/	/	room	/
<b>Palmyra</b>	"Praetorium" (Late Period I)		X		36,9	yard	yard	yard	yard	?
<b>Palmyra</b>	Insula F (north)		X		26,66	?	yard	yard	yard + room	?
<b>Amman</b>	"Museum Site" house			X	26,1	yard	room	yard	yard	/
<b>Amman</b>	Building B Area C			X	/	?	yard	room	yard + room	room
<b>Jerash</b>	Building B Area GO			X	56,84	yard	yard	yard	yard	room

Key : / absence ; ? no evidence

Fig. 4. Table of the houses data.

as in the residential area of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, standing in the courtyard of building E (Genequand 2009: 190).

The architectural comparison applied to the corpus of «central courtyard» houses shows differences in construction techniques and the use of space, such as management of access to the upper storey, courtyard flooring, or the disappearance of Byzantine porticoes in later constructions. Some of these changes may indicate a deliberate choice by newcomers.

### **Domestic Equipment: the Example of Water Use**

Domestic equipment is defined as constructed features without architectonical impact on the house, like benches, basins, drains, amongst various other possibilities, and a strict interpretation of each of these remains guesswork. On the one hand, some structures do not change in their construction and use for millennia, for example ovens, hearths or wells; and on the other hand, some structures answer various domestic purposes: a basin can be used for kneading bread, washing or dying clothes etc. Consequently, a study of domestic equipment begins firstly with an exhaustive list of structures and secondly with the identification of their use if possible: here, the focus will be on water-linked activities.

Different types of evidence testifies to the course of water through the house from the upper floor to its evacuation: once rainfall enters in the building in drainpipes, the water runs from them into a basin or storage structures. The table lists the water-linked constructions exposed during excavation of houses (**fig. 4**), comprising traditional structures such as drains, sometimes cisterns, and basins, which can be related with water use in houses from both periods. However, the list of archaeological elements shows a clear increase of water-linked structures in the 8<sup>th</sup> century constructions. More than a simple increase, the table shows innovation in the structures incorporated in the house, testifying to different use of water in houses constructed before and after the Islamic conquest. The drains are simply dug in the yard floor in the first group, but in the second they are plastered. During the transformation of the «Praetorium», a small cistern and several drains are constructed in the yard (Kowalski 1994: 58), a lavatory and washing facilities are also present in the late occupation phase of «House F» (Gawlikowski 1993: 140). In constructions dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, each plan under study shows a cistern, and in the case of the house of the «Museum Site» the rain water runs directly to the tank (Harding 1951: 7). In «House B in area C» there is an interesting structure in the corner of the room: it is a plastered platform connected to a small basin below. The excavator interpreted it as a press (Northedge 1992: 142), but it could also be a washing facility. Concerning the privy, recorded Byzantine examples always belong to upper class owners, like the local bishop's house in Kurnub (Shereshevski 1991: 28). The house of Jerash may offer one of the first constructed private privies in an urban context: some steps lead to a platform where a horseshoe structure stands outside the northern wall limit (Rattenborg/Walmsley 2013: 53). The excavators only removed the upper layers, but

the structure is very similar to the latrine discovered in the residential building E in Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (Genequand 2010: 66).

The management of water is very different from previous periods in our corpus of houses; this element can characterise the settlement of new people in Byzantine towns but also the introduction of new customs (Vernet 2014: 88). Finally, questions arise in the case of the house of Area XV in Jerusalem, which shows a complete system of water management: do the structures pertain to the Herodian period of construction? Do the structures testify to the Arabian identity of inhabitants before the Conquest?

## Discussion

Household archaeology shows that the so-called «ruralisation» of dwellings (Balty 1984: 498) seems to be merely a transformation of customs. The architecture shows the introduction of animal troughs and mangers and the reduction of the portico without a clear impoverishment of the inhabitants. The late Byzantine dwelling appears more functional to face the economic issues and political climate of the late 6<sup>th</sup> century (Morony 2004: 189). The architectural comparison demonstrates that while the same dwelling plan is constructed during Byzantine and Umayyad times, there are several differences which are an expression of an interesting use of space and remodelling during the latter period. The portico disappears or is blocked in the second group of houses showing the clear intention of newcomers; the appearance of the small scale «bayt» pattern in urban dwellings can also be related to new customs coming into the Near East. One has to note the abandonment of several main architectural features, like constructed floor and staircases; actually at this stage of the research, the main hypothesis is that architects made choices in order to house the newcomers quickly and preferred wooden staircases as well as to postpone stone flooring, because these architectural elements do not disappear in aristocratic residences. It is interesting to note that the «central courtyard» house plan is developed as an accommodation unit in construction programs and also becomes a housing unit (Genequand 2006: 18).

On the one hand, making a typological study of dwellings for Umayyad times has brought to light the use of layouts by architects that offer standardisation and efficiency for the construction program. On the other hand, in the group constructed during Islamic times, new features appear pertaining to the use of water and also to sanitary functions, such as constructed drains and latrines in the ground floor. If one takes an overview of the desert castles and palaces, the variety of installations related to water networks increases during the Early Islamic period (Genequand 2010: 186, 197, 200). These architectural modifications seem to be linked with new customs, but which ones can be related to traditions from the Arabian Peninsula and which to those coming from Islamic practices? Many studies show that public baths are still in use, either repaired and constructed during the 7<sup>th</sup> and

8<sup>th</sup> centuries, suggesting that in the domestic sphere the importance of personal hygiene increases. Can we talk about a new hygienism coming from the newcomers?

A key point for future studies will be to go further in the typological analysis to link architectural remains with material culture and historical texts in order to provide a sketch of society and everyday life after the Islamic conquest of Near East.

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