

SCALE AND THE STUDY
OF LATE ANTIQUITY
Collected Essays
from the 14th Meeting of Shifting Frontiers

by Kristina Sessa and Kevin Uhalde




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HALLIE G. MEREDITH

MAKING ANONYMITY VISIBLE THROUGH THE USE OF SCALE:
HONORING THE CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT
WITH LABORING BODIES IN 4TH-8TH CENTURY CE
CONSTRUCTION SCENES

Introduction

The choice to portray images of low-status laboring bodies in Late Antiquity was often explicitly made to establish the marginalized nature of their working bodies in relation to the status of their superiors. The depiction of a construction worker or group of workers in fourth- to eighth-century imagery was thus fundamentally relational and involved scale.¹ By *scale* I mean not only physical sizes and hierarchies but also an implied comparative relationship between the laborers and their patrons or superiors, wherein the representing laboring bodies function as instruments with which to honor their (often unseen) superiors.² In other words, scale in such images is relational in both the physical sense and a social sense. Scholarship on visual representations of everyday work has alluded to this scalar strategy, but it remains largely overlooked and undeveloped.

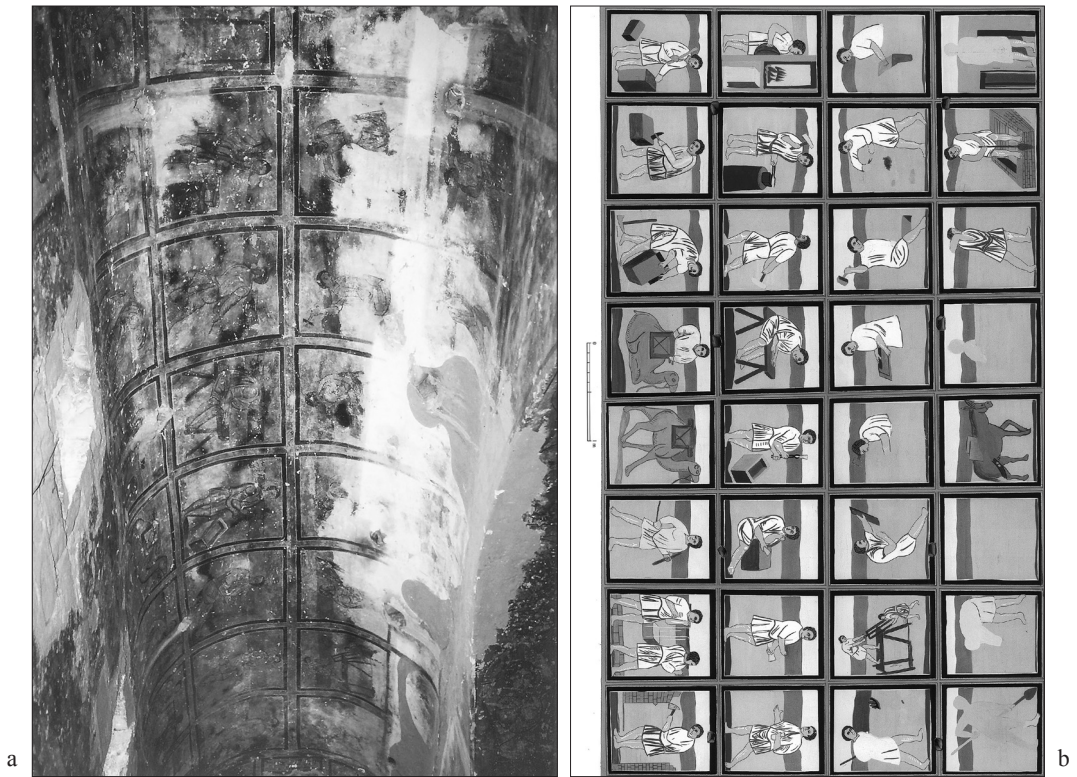
The relational function of scale is particularly illuminating with regards to the visual representation of laborers from the early Islamic period. For example, a remarkable painted ceiling from an early eighth-century CE Umayyad palace at Qusayr ‘Amra (figs. 1A-B) near Amman, Jordan, dedicated to and commissioned by Walid Ibn Yazid between 723 and 743 CE, before his short reign as caliph (743-44 CE)³, portrays more than two dozen skilled craftworkers involved in construction activities, presumably of

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¹ See, in particular, Ulrich 2007, 35-61. More recently, Sapirstein 2019, 33-56. On builders and the process of construction, see Taylor 2003; Ousterhout 2008; Reitz-Joosse 2021.

² In classical art there is a longstanding tradition whereby power dynamics were represented through the use of scale, for instance with enslaved people and servants depicted proportionately smaller than their owners; see, for example, Dunbabin 2003: 443-468, 445; Lenski. 129-157.

³ Fig. 1A: Photo Cl. Vibert - Guigue, AOrOC, CNRS-ENS-PSL, Paris. Fig. 1B: Vibert - Guigue - Bisheh 2007, pl. 131. The date for this commission is based on an Arabic inscription found in 2012: World Monuments Fund, <https://www.wmf.org/project/qusayr-amra>. See further discussion below.



1. - A. Painted ceiling in the audience hall east bay vault, c. 723-743 CE, in a palace commissioned by Walid Ibn Yazid (caliph 743-744 CE), Qusayr 'Amra, near Amman, Jordan. Photograph Cl. Vibert-Guigue, AOrOC, CNRS-ENS-PSL, Paris. B. Restoration drawing of the painted ceiling at Qusayr 'Amra'. Drawing Cl. Vibert-Guigue, AOrOC, CNRS-ENS-PSL, Paris.

the very building in which the image appears. The workers are roughly uniform in size and appear without any accompanying higher status figures.⁴ Most figures are shown within a frame, thereby isolated from one another. At first glance, the uniform size of the laborers' bodies seems to suggest that social scale has been jettisoned. It has also led scholars to characterize the working bodies as «photographic», i.e., as essentially documentary.⁵ The presumption, however, that the workers' bodies were effectively portraits ignores socio-economic investigations concerning low-status late Roman and early Islamic professions, archaeological evidence concerning the representation of slavery, and the asymmetric power dynamics inherent in economic communities.⁶ It also discounts the possibility that scale was a purposeful visual strategy. This chapter considers what

⁴ For continuities, see, for example, Genequand 2006, 3-25. On Umayyad architectural estates more widely, Kennedy 2010, 181-198; Kennedy 2011, 54-79.

⁵ Cf. Fowden 2004, 251-257, esp. 251-252; Vibert - Guigue 2004, 59-65, esp. 62.

⁶ On low-status professions, see Bond 2016. On Roman slavery, see, in particular, Lenski 2013, 129-157; Joshel - Petersen 2014, 118-161; Harper - Scheidel 2018, 86-105. On late Roman economic communities, see Grey 2007, 155-175; Loseby 2012, 334-360; Grey 2015.

scale can contribute to the discussion of this particular image as an example of how long and varied the late antique tradition of representing low-status working bodies and their work extended.

Continuities between late antique Roman and early Islamic architecture are widely accepted. We can thus look to the mural at Qusayr ‘Amra for insights into a broader late antique set of socio-spatial patterns. The Qusayr ‘Amra painting highlights uniformity and anonymity as part of an extensive program of employing myriad workers’ bodies as vehicles with which to honor an unseen patron. Moreover, this strategic use of a relational scale continues a practice well known since at least the fourth century, and seen in late Roman funerary commemorations. These feature «icons of work», where recursive laboring bodies are literally and figuratively peripheral to the true focus, which is the honorand.⁷ In relation to visual and social scale, this chapter first considers individualized portrayals of living laborers in other spaces and media, where we find limited internal hierarchy or status differentiation; it then contrasts the abstracted bodies of skilled builders and painted craftworkers at Qusayr ‘Amra as impersonal images.

Individualizing Living Subordinates

Just as scale is relational, so is the social positioning inherent in status. Representations of identity in fourth- to eighth-century visual art typically consist of two parts: naming and showing. Typically, representations of workers show but do not name.⁸ Conversely, patrons may be named but not shown.⁹ It has been suggested that the point of an identifying inscription or name label was to prioritize one particular meaning over a range of possibilities. The absence of a singular identification by means of an inscription «enriches the referential range» for viewers.¹⁰ Conversely, imagery invoking powerful rulers also relied on identification, often achieved by an accompanying name label. A fundamental point in having one’s name included in a dedication was to clarify who was – and was not – honored. An absence of name labels further suggests the workers’ role was limited to objectified bodies.

In the fourth century in particular, there is a relative wealth of tombs in Italy identifying the status of the deceased and their profession as a skilled worker involved in manufacturing.¹¹ Contrasting with the anonymous images of craftworkers on the painted

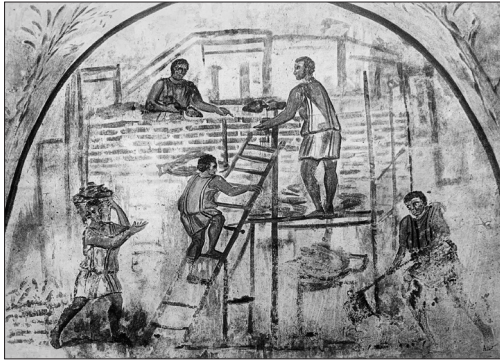
⁷ Sapirstein 2019, 34.

⁸ For pioneering work on status in the Roman world, see Brilliant 1963; Garnsey 1970. On status and builders, see *supra* n. 1.

⁹ Cf., a biblical Tower of Babel construction scene with a donor inscription in a fifth-century synagogue in Israel: Magness *et al.*, 2018, 61-131. On mid-sixth-century episcopal commemorations, see Deliyannis 2014, 41-62. While scholars have long studied the widespread phenomenon of commemorating a singular benefactor, they have overlooked workers’ bodies and the visual presentation of binaries between a collective and singular agent responsible for a building project.

¹⁰ Maguire 2007, 139-140.

¹¹ At least 400 images of workers from the Roman Empire are known. In particular, see Zimmer 1982; Zimmer 1985, 205-28. Cf. Kampen 1981; Scheidel 2010, 89-113, esp. 99-100. Over 1,500 occupational



2A. - Fresco depicting a construction scene, from the Hypogeum of Trebius Justus, c. mid-fourth century C.E., Via Latina, Rome. Wilpert 1913, pl. 16.



2B. - Fresco representing Trebius Justus and *magister* Generosus from the Hypogeum of Trebius Justus, c. mid-fourth century C.E., Via Latina, Rome. Wilpert 1913, pl. 17.

palace ceiling, a tomb adorned with several frescoes includes among them images of enslaved builders with accompanying labels identifying them by name and even title. Discovered in 1911, the mid-fourth century hypogeum of Trebius Justus in the Via Latina at Rome is an example of an *arcosolium* adorned with inscriptions and images portraying the deceased, their family, and a «group portrait» of the enslaved workers involved in construction (figs. 2A-B).¹² As part of honoring the business that made the family wealthy, the workers' identities were commemorated in what are effectively portraits of individuals.¹³ In a prominent in-process construction scene, for instance, a worker dressed in a *tunica manicata* and *colobium* carries bricks, while another climbs a ladder, and another uses scaffolding to lay mortar (fig. 2A).¹⁴ Rare surviving images of building work featuring active laborers, largely from the fourth and fifth centuries, tend to delineate a workspace that is separate from the space occupied by the viewer.¹⁵ It creates a social division between the viewer's space and a space occupied by laboring bodies as «other».

It is therefore noteworthy that the individualized workers are portrayed as though appearing in the viewer's, i.e. mourner's, space as opposed to a pictorial frame separate from the viewer as at Qusayr 'Amra.

titles survive from Roman epitaphs, see Joshel 1992. According to Zimmer, only around one-third of funerary scenes show artisans actively working, Zimmer 1982, 67-71; Zimmer 1985, 218-20.

¹² Fig. 2A: Wilpert 1913, pl. 16; fig. 2B: Wilpert 1913, pl. 17. See Marucchi 1911, 209-235, pl. 10, fig. 3, pl. 11, fig. 5; Rea 2004.

¹³ It is generally accepted that Trebius Justus's primary aim was «to advertise his wealth and social status within an ideological language familiar to the ruling Roman classes,» e.g., Valenzani 2007, 435-449, esp. 440.

¹⁴ Cf. Steinberg 2020, 103-116.

¹⁵ See, for example, the painted construction scene in the ca. fourth-century San Marco villa: Adam - Varène 1980: 213-238, esp. 216-217, fig. 2. Cf. manuscript illuminations in the late fourth/early fifth-century Quedlinburg Itala manuscript of a scene interpreted as the construction of Solomon's Temple; a fifth-century depiction of the construction of Carthage, *Aeneid*, I, *Vat. Lat.* 3225, fol. 13 recto, Vatican Virgil Codex; and a fourth-century depiction of tesserae production in the Museum degli Scavi, Ostia (inv. no. 132). See Prayon 1986, 1-9, fig. 1 and Zimmer 1982, 36, cat. no. 81, respectively.

Trebius Justus is invariably shown without a name label, presumably because he would not need to be identified in his own son's tomb.¹⁶ A fresco depicts Trebius Justus with the tools of his trade speaking with a worker represented smaller in scale identified by title and name as *magister Generosus* («master builder Generosus») (fig. 2B).¹⁷ The walls of the tomb show and name four of Trebius Justus's enslaved employees. Even a mule named *Leporius* is immortalized. He is shown bearing a pack saddle loaded with bricks and guided by a young man, *Fortunatus*. There is no commensurate personalisation of workers' bodies or naming on the palace ceiling in Jordan. Moreover, the depiction of physical scale to denote differences in status between Trebius Justus and the socially-inferior *Generosus* is missing from Qusayr 'Amra, where there is no direct visual comparison between the body of the patron and subordinate working bodies.

Instead, another mural in the Umayyad palace portrays deference by comparing the bodies of world rulers of the highest status as the soon-to-be caliph's social counterparts. One expects that his aspiration to become caliph, achieved shortly after the palace's decoration, may have colored his choice to directly illustrate his powerful colleagues. The mural for which Qusayr 'Amra is most famous is a heavily damaged painting of six kings in the west hall, each with an accompanying bilingual Arabic and Greek inscription, gesturing towards what was likely a singular portrait of the palace patron, and soon-to-be caliph, Walid Ibn Yazid.¹⁸ By portraying – and naming – each of the world leaders represented as paying homage, their identities elevate the caliph's stature as a demonstration of their deference. The inclusion of these adjacent name labels demonstrates the perceived importance attached to critical audiences identifying those paying homage and to whom. None of the workers portrayed on the Umayyad palace ceiling has an accompanying inscription identifying a name or title; the absence of an identifying inscription and the scale of the craftworkers shown are a means with which to deny status.

Internal Hierarchy among Craftworkers

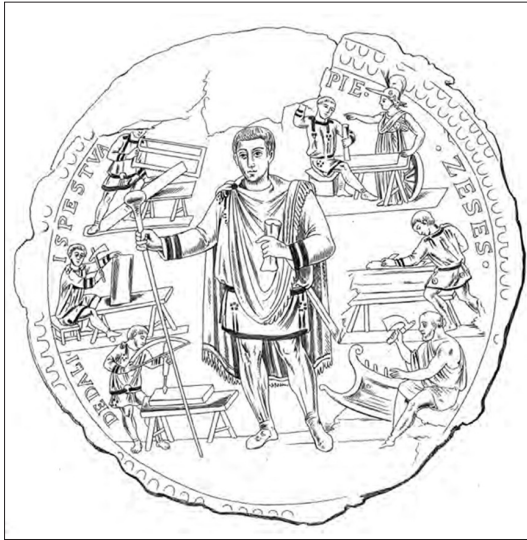
There is no discernible hierarchy among the workers represented at Qusayr 'Amra. The only clues to a shared goal are in the gestures between figures.¹⁹ Apart from dif-

¹⁶ In a parallel manner, churches with images of Christ and his apostles may label individual saints, in particular when portrayed as a group, but Christ's significance, often indicated by his physical position at the apex of an arch, meant labels were unnecessary. See, for example, the sixth-century *Capella Arcivescovile*, Ravenna.

¹⁷ The use of a single-word name indicates the *magister* was a slave. Wilpert 1913, 285 suggested that *Generosus* was also shown in the construction scene on the scaffold. This suggests individuality represented in both image and name. Whether or not the image is a «portrait», for our purposes what is important is that the artist appears to have sought a mimetic likeness. On evidence for slave teachers in Late Antiquity, see Lenski 2018-2019, 127-191.

¹⁸ See Musil 1907, 2, pl. XXVI; Vibert - Guigue - Bisheh 2007, pl. 142 a, b.

¹⁹ The gestures suggest a progression from left to right. This orientation follows Greek and Latin but not Middle Persian, which is read from right to left. This may suggest that the painters and foreman



3. - Six peripheral craftworkers and a possible patron on a gold-glass vessel fragment from Rome, fourth century CE, Museo Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (60788). Kisa 1908, III, fig. 357.

differentiation displayed among the tools that each wields, the working bodies are largely identical. In contrast, a fragmentary early fourth-century gold-glass roundel with images of half a dozen craftworkers exhibits a degree of internal status differentiation. Found in the catacombs of Rome, it portrays six peripheral woodworkers building a boat (fig. 3).²⁰ This fragmentary roundel may have been used as a personalized grave marker for the central figure.²¹ The elite figure is shown frontally holding a staff and *rotulus*, wearing trousers, shoes, a short sword, and a *fibula*, further distinguishing his elevated rank from those of the low status craftworkers. Most likely to show deference to the central figure, the peripheral workers are rendered subordinate to him.

Each worker performs a different and related activity on a possibly shared trestle table. Five of the six workers are beardless and wearing the same kind of toga (cf. Generosus in fig. 2B).²² It is uncertain whether these nearly identical workers (in age, size, dress, and location) represent one person performing tasks in sequence or different workers. Taken as a whole, scholars have interpreted the laborers' communal action as a representation of the sequential construction of a wooden ship, perhaps with the same board moving through the hands of various workers.²³ Mistakes have been attributed to a glassworker's unfamiliarity with carpentry. If the errors were intentional, in part to enhance the recognizability of the carpenter's tasks as distinct, they do not impede the portrayal of two internal hierarchies concerning status and recognition.

Despite the boat builders' recursive bodies, there are internal distinctions seen here that are missing from the symbolic bodies of Qusayr 'Amra. First, in an example of differentiation through divine recognition, the worker positioned at the level of the central

travelled from the Roman world. See, for example, the painted frescoes in the third-century synagogue at Dura Europos, Syria, Kraeling - Bellinger 1956.

²⁰ Figure 3: Kisa 1908, III, fig. 357. Likely the base of a vessel with engraved gold-leaf figural adornment sandwiched in between two layers of decolorized glass, it was discovered in 1731 in the cemetery of S. Saturnini Mart., Via Salaria, Rome, now Museo Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (60788).

²¹ See Meredith 2015, 219-241. Cf. Walker 2018.

²² On dress worn by laborers, see Steinberg 2020, 115-116.

²³ Ulrich 2007, 43.

figure's head is accompanied by Athena. The deity points with her right hand to a worker now lost. Second, these figures are differentiated from the next worker by age, size, dress, task, and setting. Unlike the youthful workers, the last one appears bearded and bald in *exomis* (a short toga fastened on one shoulder and worn for hard manual labor), working on the boat itself instead of preparing materials. He is thereby performing a task that appears to require greater skill and experience.

Impersonal Images in a Shared Space at Oued Rmel, Tunisia

The implicit comparison created by juxtaposing an honorand with virtually interchangeable figures simultaneously emphasizes the insignificance of each worker while highlighting their vital contribution to the collective. Adopting a scalar strategy similar to Qusayr 'Amra, coupled with a degree of internal hierarchy like that seen in the gold-glass medallion discussed above, is a fragmentary mosaic panel that once adorned a late fourth- to sixth-century Christian basilica at Oued Rmel in Tunisia. The visible right arc of a circle was most likely the dedication inscription at the centre of a symmetrical composition, with the extant construction scene representing the lower right half of a composition comprised of three horizontal registers (fig. 4).²⁴ The mosaic represents laborers (wearing the *tunica manicata*) jointly constructing the building that the viewer stands within.²⁵

At first glance, interactions among workers appear to be the main focus. A division of space, however, suggests internal relationships between and among anonymous figures. Craftworkers in close proximity are arranged in three separate horizontal registers. Pairs of anonymous workers are represented making a hole in a wooden plank or piece of stone, working on a board or column, moving a finished column shaft, crushing mortar, and mixing mortar.²⁶ Scholars have referred to these anonymous laborers as «the faithful building their church».²⁷ Similarly, distinctions made based on dress and tools suggest that the workers represent possibly historically inspired abstractions. The generalized gestures of each laborer represent construction activities without specifying where a task falls within an implied sequence. As a result, and similar to the ceiling at Qusayr 'Amra, labor in this North African mosaic appears unending, perhaps to honor donors in perpetuity.

The workers' implied exchanges, as part of a shared visual space, suggest that their collective action is in pursuit of a common goal worthy of commemoration in the basilica. This encourages viewers to interpret their activities as joined and in service of the

²⁴ Fig. 4: The National Bardo Museum, Tunisia. Accessed 14th October 2022, http://www.bardomuseum.tn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129%3Achantier-de-construction-dune-basilique-&catid=43%3Alatine-romaine-&Itemid=73&lang=en. The border along the bottom and right sides suggest the extent of the original. Bardo National Museum, Tunis (inv. no. 463). See Dunbabin 1978, 192, fig. 192.

²⁵ Steinberg 2020, 116.

²⁶ Dunbabin 1978, 192; Abed 2006, 106; Slim 1994, 126-155, esp. 152-154.

²⁷ Abed 2006, fig. 5.18.



4. - Mosaic, late fourth to sixth century CE, from a basilica in Oued Rmel, Tunisia. The National Bardo Museum, Tunisia. Accessed 14th October 2022, http://www.bardomuseum.tn/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=129%3Ac-hantier-de-construction-dune-basilique-&catid=43%3AAlatine-romaine-&Itemid=73&lang=en.

of symbolic labor, functioning as a vehicle to refer back to and honor the patron as an ideal viewer.

Symbolic Working Bodies and the Scale of the Undertaking at Qusayr 'Amra

The late antique tradition of representing artisans and their work continued into the Umayyad period. A number of scalar strategies were used in the visual culture of the

²⁸ Cf. sixth-century apse mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna for an example of a highlighted, and similarly intentional, gesturing in a Christian church (from Christ to the honored emperor responsible for the building project, Justinian).

donor's wishes, alluded to by the middle register's surviving portion of a framed dedication. On the left of the uppermost register and dressed in a longer toga is a figure who may be an architect or manager. Holding a staff in his left hand, he surveys the work of the construction workers, and with his right hand he gestures towards an inscribed circular wreath, originally likely centrally positioned, and framed by symmetrically positioned nude winged figures, which clearly point the viewers to shift their focus to honor the donor.²⁸ The scalar strategy employed connects the visible building project with unseen benefactors via peripheral bodies portrayed as instrumental symbols of low-status labor. Workers' bodies appear choreographed, serving as a visual trope. Although the mosaic decorated a genuine basilica, there is no reason to conclude that the workers in the image were real. The mosaic does not individualize living laborers, but instead highlights the scale

fourth to eighth centuries, for example, depicting attendant figures as servile alongside their masters in a visual hierarchy²⁹ or in the guise of a servant and portrayed «working» as a functional object.³⁰ When they are included, images of bodies at work are typically marginalized as part of a visual comparison.

At Qusayr ‘Amra the repeated bodies perform independent tasks, highlighted as distinct by their individual frames. The use of comparative sizes and social positioning – and the overall impression of scale that results – prompts viewers to identify and focus on differences between and among the figures shown. However, the only discernible individuality ascribed to the abstracted workers is their profession. Not only do these figures typically occupy the periphery of a pictorial space but also their identities and almost any individualization are usually missing. The social marginalization of working artisans is portrayed by their peripheral bodies, depicted as an indistinguishable, anonymous mass: nearly identical bodies similarly dressed and equivalent in size and color. Their inferior status calls attention to their superior counterparts, as we have seen (cf. figs. 2B, 3-4). Commonly, their only distinguishable feature is the tool each wields, rendering them in effect not as individual laborers but instead as tools.

These «portraits» are of implements in action (i.e. adze, chisel, hammer, etc.), where the servile bodies themselves also serve as tools. Additionally, although known, images of active labor are rare.³¹ Roman craftworkers did not necessarily choose to be portrayed actively working. As part of an extensive visual program largely preserved on walls that span the entire palace of a man who was about to become Caliph, at Qusayr ‘Amra we see symbolic active workers’ bodies as objectified and instrumental.

We can expect that these trends were not limited to artisans working within the confines of the late Roman Empire. The program of thirty-two adjacent square paintings at Qusayr ‘Amra is arranged in four adjacent horizontal rows (figs. 1A-B).³² These paintings cover the entire ceiling from the east vault of an audience hall of the large palace. These framed paintings from 723-743 CE show skilled craftworkers actively engaged in construction.³³

Although representations of workers differ slightly from one another, their faces are not individualized (cf. figs. 1A-B). The adjacent placement of the repeating squares results in a grid pattern, comprised of differentiable vignettes creating the semblance of a unified whole. Each frame is uniform in size.³⁴ Skilled stonemasons, builders, carpenters, smiths, and unskilled workers each appear identically dressed in short-belted

²⁹ Dunbabin 2003: 443-468.

³⁰ Lenski 2013, 129-157.

³¹ See *supra* notes 11 and 15.

³² See especially Musil 1907, 2, pl. XXVI. Recently, see Vibert - Guigue - Bisheh 2007, pls. 57-63, 131; Taragan 2008:141-160; World Monuments Fund, <https://www.wmf.org/project/qusayr-amra>. For more multi-figured scenes in the palace also comprised of several registers, see Vibert - Guigue - Bisheh 2007, pls. 18, 46-8, 65, 122-3, 133-4.

³³ Other painted subjects include zodiac signs, nude and partially clothed women at the bath, see *supra* n. 18.

³⁴ Cf., in the sixth-century Suwayfiyah chapel in Amman, Jordan, curvilinear acanthus frames



5. - Fragment of a mosaic depicting a framed craftworker, identified as one of many, sixth or seventh century CE, National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (inv. no. 15121). Photo Lennart Larsen.

tunics. All figures have a consistent and unified background sharing the same colors. Whether that of a skilled smith or transport animal, each body is individually framed with those in pairs engaged in joint labor (sawing or carrying), yet their interactions are part of a whole. Even when a worker is shown alone, the shared gaze and posture suggests a community of producers through implied interactions. We have seen building activities portrayed in a shared space (fig. 2A) and on independent horizontal registers (figs. 3-4). Qusayr ‘Amra, however, represents what appears to have been an early Islamic visual strategy (cf. fig. 5),³⁵ portraying generalised bodies at work in separate frames as though working side-by-side. All these features together suggest unity of purpose through scalar iterations.

Scale was visually employed as part of a strategy with which to poignantly honor the figure conspicuously absent from the painted ceiling. That figure was the caliph

encircling individual figures even when a transport animal and its driver appear in two adjacent frames with a rope connecting the two, Piccirillo - Bikai - Dailey 1993, fig. 470.

³⁵ Fig. 5: National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. Photo Lennart Larsen. On this mosaic fragment depicting a framed solitary worker reconstructed as one among many workers, see Neira 2012:103-113, fig. 1.

as patron or builder.³⁶ In the early 2000s, however, Claude Vibert-Guigue and Garth Fowden interpreted these images as recording the actual process of construction, as though these images were copying what they saw.³⁷ Vibert-Guigue directed the restoration of these murals, interpreting each row as an illustration of tasks associated with a specific material: stonemasonry, blacksmithing, carpentry, and (in damaged paintings) preparation of mortar.³⁸ Similarly, Fowden characterized the framed images as faithfully reproducing the construction industry: «they could have been ‘photographed’». ³⁹ Most noticeably, the image does not show us what it is the workers are working on, either as in-process or as a completed building.⁴⁰ As noted by Taragan, the theory that the image is intended to depict the construction realistically also overlooks the rest of the building’s visual program, in particular an enthroned figure of the Islamic patron and «a self-glorifying image of the Umayyad dynasty in the eyes of their Muslim and Christian subjects alike». ⁴¹ This extensive representation of nearly three dozen laboring bodies was not simply a photographic record of events; interpreting it as such would discount the critical importance of scale in this and other murals in the palace.

Images of work like this one were part of a design program with an implicit message and agenda. Although there is continuity with fourth- to sixth-century images of workers’ bodies generally (cf. figs. 2-4), this particular program reflects the experimental nature of the late antique visual evidence. There are no known parallels for the Umayyad palace ceiling mural from Sasanian or Byzantine art for a framed grid featuring dozens of artisans but without an in-process building, city or other objective.⁴²

Images of laboring bodies play with presence and absence to directly engage viewers within the space itself. The scale of the murals at Qusayr ‘Amra use images of workers bodies as vehicles engaged in ceaseless work to celebrate the patron’s (now) finished palace by showing its history, thereby focusing the viewer on the space they occupy.⁴³ Such myriad depictions of skilled workers in the process of working serve to anonymize them. The bodies of the anonymous workers, like those of the named kings, were the

³⁶ See Taragan 2008, 141-160. As a parallel, see, for example, Ostrogothic king Theoderic’s building program in his capital, Johnson 1988, 73-96.

³⁷ In contrast, others have argued that since the classical period the goal in showing workers was not to document everyday life but instead to present a recognizable «icon of work», Sapirstein 2019, 34. Craftworkers portrayals of other craftworkers were surely informed, at least in part, by real life observation and experience, see Ulrich 2007, 35-61. On mistakes ascribed to one type of artisan portraying another, see, for example, Goodman 1964, 161.

³⁸ Vibert - Guigue 2004, 59-65, esp. 62; Vibert - Guigue - Bisheh 2007.

³⁹ Fowden 2004, 251-257, esp. 251-252. These geometric frames have been characterised as a «window» as part of a shift to increasing abstraction, Kitzinger 1977, 76. Recently on frames and framing, see Platt-Squire 2017.

⁴⁰ As has been noted by Taragan 2008, 143. Cf. Meredith forthcoming.

⁴¹ Taragan 2008, 141, 145-146, 147. On the six kings painting, see *supra* n. 18.

⁴² See *supra* n. 35 for a possible fragmentary mosaic parallel (cf. fig. 5).

⁴³ Cf., the Oued Rmel mosaic in Tunisia above. The argument that the unnamed workers’ bodies shown were more than genre scenes parallels earlier debates about whether *ekphraseis* represented real objects or were perhaps inspired by genuine objects but fictional. The latter interpretation is now generally accepted.

product of the calculated visual use of scale, and served as a visual means by which to pay homage to their Umayyad patron.

Conclusion

The ceiling at Qusayr ‘Amra does not appear to represent a documentary impulse comparable to portraiture. Instead, appropriated bodies are presented as vehicles with which to pay tribute to the patron, and the scale embodied in the Qusayr ‘Amra ceiling and elsewhere aids in accomplishing that goal. In images of active construction in similar images with workers as the focus – whether in part commemorating individual identities (as in Trebius Justus’ hypogeum), displaying an internal hierarchy among workers (as in the gold-glass roundel), or in objectified, impersonal representations of workers (such as the Christian basilica at Oued Rmel and the Umayyad palace at Qusayr ‘Amra) – artisan anonymity represents a significant part of the reason for a building’s existence. By the early eighth century, depictions of builders’ recursive bodies also served as tools to glorify a patron for the achievement of the scale of their monumental building project.⁴⁴ In such objectified images of skilled craftworkers’ bodies writ large, where artisans were effectively reduced to the status of tools, scale was a conscious choice marshalled for a purpose. The hierarchies conveyed through the use of scale served to reinforce the marginalization that was such a prominent feature of this era.

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⁴⁴ Akin to the trope of a model of the building offered. See, for instance, the apse mosaic showing Bishop Ecclesius offering the church to Christ at mid-sixth century S. Vitale, Ravenna. Only the symbolic workers offered are shown dedicated not to God but to the caliph.

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