



## Hisham's Palace Mosaics

### Waiting for the Permanent Display

*Courtesy of VisitPalestine.ps*



Khirbet al-Mafjar, commonly known as Hisham's Palace, is the most important Islamic-period monument in the Jericho area. It was built as a hunting lodge and winter resort in the eighth century during the Umayyad dynasty. The place is named after Caliph Hisham bin AbdulMalek (724–743 AD), who was mistakenly thought to have ordered the construction of the edifice. After experts examined the site more thoroughly, however, it was attributed to Hisham's successor and nephew Al-Walid bin Yazid (743–744 AD). The unconventional decoration of Khirbet al-Mafjar was declared to be incompatible with the righteous character of Caliph Hisham, though it fits well with the rather carefree lifestyle that Al-Walid is said to have had.

The complex consisted of an imposing two-story royal building, a prominent mosque, an ornate bath complex, and an agricultural estate. An elaborate irrigation system provided the buildings with

water from nearby springs. The site was discovered in 1873, but the major source of archaeological data comes from the excavations of Palestinian archaeologist Dimitri Baramki, who worked on the site between 1934 and 1948.

It is said that the magnificent edifice was destroyed by an earthquake that hit the area in 747 AD, shortly after construction of the palace. At that time, the present symbol of Jericho, the ornamental six-pointed star, which was placed above the entrance to the palace, fell down and shattered. Nowadays, its reconstruction stands in the central area of the archaeological site.

The interior of Hisham's Palace was adorned with some of the finest representations of Umayyad period art. Carved stucco – exceptional in style and quality – was found at the site. Of special significance is the statue that represents a male bearded figure who is holding a sword. Found triumphantly



standing atop two back-to-back stone lions in a niche above the entrance to the bath hall, it is assumed to represent Caliph Al-Walid himself.

Nevertheless, the most famous artistic aspect of Khirbet al-Mafjar are the high-quality floor mosaics in the free-standing bath complex that feature a wide variety of colors and figural motifs. They are considered to be one of the Middle East's largest carpet mosaics and consist of 38 individual designs that cover 827 square meters of the audience hall. The floor is usually covered with a thick layer of sand for conservation purposes.

In 2015, the Palestine Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Japan International Cooperation Agency signed an agreement to allow the sprawling carpet mosaics to be uncovered and prepared for display. Archaeologists recently removed the protective cover, but only for one day.

On October 20, visitors had a chance to explore the mosaics' elaborate patterns, celebrating the start of a long-awaited renovation project. The bath's floor is now covered again, but the restoration project, which is expected to be completed in 2018, will see it uncovered permanently, topped with an elevated viewing walkway and shelter.

The famous floor mosaic commonly known as "Tree of Life," which is located in a special reception room or *diwan*, depicts a lion attacking a gazelle underneath a fruit-bearing tree. This mosaic has been accessible to visitors for many years and can be viewed during the regular, daily opening hours of the complex (8 am to 6 pm).

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