

Palace in the Lake

By Ammar Khammash, The Jordan Times Weekender - September 2002

Heading west out of Amman after the town of Wadi Seer, the road descends into a lush valley. Poplar trees stand on edges of aqueducts and pomegranate groves cover the terraced wadi-sides. The entire valley is a site of natural charm.

As the road gets narrower and more rural, a final drive by a few fig trees brings you to a powerful view of Qasr Al Abd, within its splendid surrounding. This palace must have followed an idea of beauty as in paradise, understanding its overall context can open up enjoyable imaginary vistas.

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https://www.khammash.com/sites/default/files/images/research/qasr_abd_01.jpg



By design, Qasr al Abd (?Palace of the Slave?) was surrounded by water. Its architect must have conceived water-reflection as an architectural element inseparable from the structure itself. An artificial lake was made possible by building a dam at the lower side of the site towards the south, and with water running in plenty the lake was kept full. Water was also piped to reach the palace with some pressure, enough for domestic use and for gushing out as fountains from the mouths of animals ornaments mounted on the outer walls.

Delicately animated by the rhythmic ripples vanishing in growing circles, the image of the palace was

reflected in the lake. It might be for this reason that it was designed as a simple bold mass, a symmetric box, with a pillared entrance. With its reflection in water, the palace would appear as a double structure ?base to base- suspended in mid-flight, eternal, and symmetrically framed at the real upper end and the reflected lower end, by friezes of ornaments.

Until now, the space of the lake is still decipherable, parts of it are cultivated while other parts, unfortunately, are effaced by rapidly approaching modern construction. The lack of planning has also allowed some multi-floor houses to be built in the proximity of the monument, competing in height; the higher the new additions the more dwarfed the monument appears.

As a pre-Roman palace, Qasr al Abd is a rare specimen of Hellenistic architecture. It was built around 200 BC, and was never completed. Unlike typical Roman construction in which walls are built of stone-courses about 50cm in height, the walls of this villa are of only three courses of stone that reach the full height until the upper frieze. Each course is made of building blocks about 3 meters high and up to 6 meter long. Some of the bigger cornerstones would weigh more than 20 small cars.

This Hellenistic villa was, until a century ago, in the midst of an oak forest. That surrounding has been pictured in the following text written by Colonel Conder who explored Jordan in 1881, he writes in his book Heth and Moab:

The scenery in this, and in the other gorges near it, presents a striking contrast to that of the plateau. Clear brooks are running between lawns of turf, or breaking in falls over high precipices, hung with brambles, and green with fern: thick oak woods of most English character climb the slopes, and here and there crown a white chalk-cliff. Lower down are yellow, red and purple sandstones, the peaks and narrow ridges of the marl just over the Jordan plains, broad wolds, dotted with trees and with Arab encampments, and the deep ravines, each with a narrow bed, in which the murmur of the stream is heard, but its course is concealed by the tall canes, or by the dusky oleander bushes, blushing with ruddy blossom.

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