

# A Masterpiece of Omani 17th Century Architecture

THE PALACE OF IMAM BILARAB BIN SULTAN AL-YAARABA AT JABRIN

*Eugenio Galdieri*

*Much of the information found in the following article will also be found in the technical report sent by the author to the authorities of the Sultanate of Oman after his visit in May 1974, and in the preliminary report which is to appear in East and West, the journal of the Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.*

*I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude once again to officials and individuals of the Sultanate for their hospitality; to the architect P. A. Faulkner for the excellent report drawn up by him in 1973<sup>1</sup>. I wish also to express my heartfelt thanks to the memory of Andrew Williamson, to his tenacity and enthusiasm.*

A systematic examination has yet to be made of the monumental remains which are still visible (there are few, to tell the truth) scattered throughout the interior of Oman, and—perhaps easier—of the still extant examples of minor architecture, especially at Muscat, Sohar, and Hamra. Only after this examination has been made can we proceed to the study of the reciprocal influences which affected a country like Oman, linked physically to the cultural and artistic Arab world but also, on account of ancient commercial ties, reaching out towards the eastern coast of the Gulf, the Punjab, Gujarat in India and towards East Africa.

Oman has no great architectural complexes from the past, although it boasts a very ancient history. Now that scientific interest has increased, the years to come will reveal to us whether such complexes never existed or have completely disappeared or, as I personally hope and believe, whether they are simply concealed.

Some military constructions along the coast—the Portuguese forts—are well-known but, strictly speaking, cannot be considered as a part of Omani architecture. Thus it was with great joy that I accepted the invitation of the Directorate of Antiquities to visit Fort Jabrin, near Bahla. Engaged as I have been for years in the study and restoration of post-Islamic monuments in Iran, and in particular of civilian constructions of the Safavid period (1500–1720) at Esfahan, I was greatly interested in gaining first-hand knowledge of a building assignable to the same period, the seat of a monarch like those at Esfahan and perhaps influenced by them. Upon my arrival at Jabrin and the completion of a rapid preliminary examination of the building, I had first of all to correct the name by which it is known. In the technical report, as well as in the present article, the expression “Fort Jabrin” will not be found. Instead that—in my opinion more exact—of “Palace of Imam Bilarab Bin Sultan Al-Yaaraba at Jabrin” has been used.

To my mind, in fact, the expression “Fort” in a sense humbles the nobility of the monumental complex which was surely the product of a time of peace and tranquillity, as I shall point out presently. More serious is the fact that the expression “Fort” tends to identify the palace with one of the many fortified buildings (or real strongholds constructed or inspired by the Portuguese) which fortunately abound in Oman. Whereas, considered as a royal complex of a pacific nature (only subsequently modified

by the addition of defence measures of every kind and transformed into a considerably well fortified stronghold), the monument, in view of particular volumetric and decorative features, may be considered as unique, as least as far as our present knowledge of it and its particular period goes.

The history of such a complex monument cannot be studied or reconstructed in the few days which I was able to devote to it. More thorough studies and investigations, carried out by me or other research-workers, will tell us the nature and number of the constructive phases and what span of time they covered. For the moment the reader must be satisfied with the notes and deductions which follow.

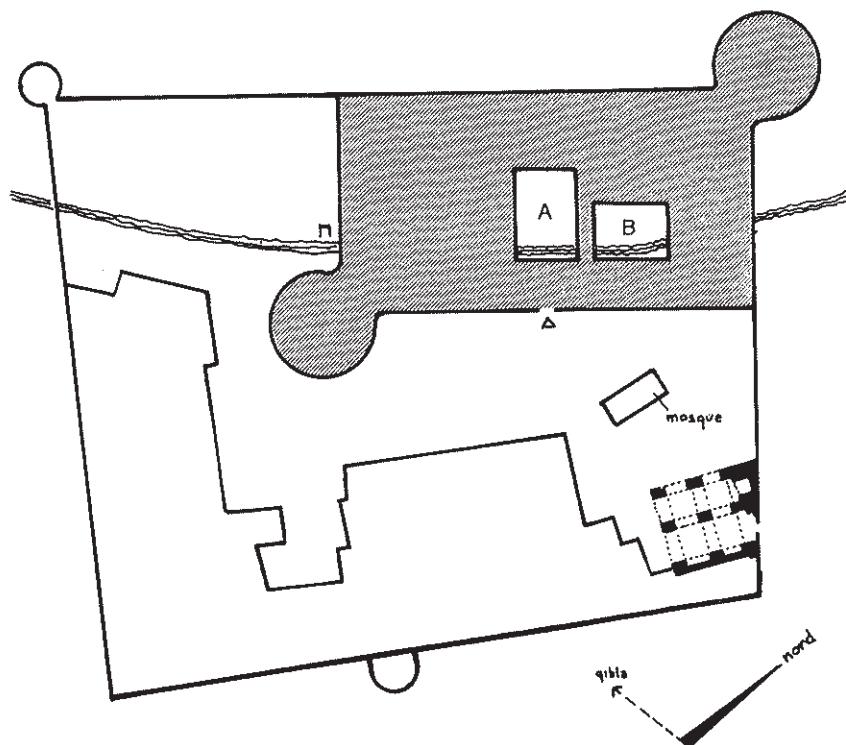
### 1—Position and description

Although we owe the description of the complex to the practically complete study made by the architect P. A. Faulkner in his valuable report of February 1973, mentioned above, it is worth mentioning here the main features of the building.

It stands in the middle of a small oasis, its mass rising above the old date palms and the modest civilian buildings in unbaked brick and mud (*Plate 1*); the settlement is known today by the name of Jabrin<sup>2</sup> and is more than 20 km. SSW from the better known township of Bahla. In its turn Bahla (which today shares with Nizwa the honour of having been one of two former capitals of Oman) is a little less than 150 km. from the present capital, Muscat. In terms of a space-time relationship, the distance between the oasis of Jabrin and the capital is at present about 5 hours' journey by Land Rover. The vegetation and climate are typical of the tropical zone (the co-ordinates of Muscat are: lat.  $23^{\circ} 37' 26''$  N, long.  $56^{\circ} 15' 26''$  E).



PLATE I. *The Palace standing in the middle of a small oasis. (11284/2 MT)*

FIG. 1. *Plan of the Palace. 1:500.*

The oasis is at the centre of a wide plain, at the end of the first large chain of the Jabal Akhdar, a forewarning as it were of the Rub al-Khali, the great sandy "emptiness". Thus, from the two artillery towers which today stand at the N and S of the building, an immense area, almost completely without vegetation, is dominated. Although the position of the building, judging from the inside, may give the impression of having great strategic value, when seen from the outside its defects are immediately apparent, given its isolation and its distance from any natural defensive hold. In reality the defensive apparatus of the building, which was obviously created in a subsequent period, demonstrates its nature as a "deterrent" rather than as an engine of war, as Faulkner himself has also pointed out in substance.<sup>3</sup>

At Jabrin there is a falaj<sup>4</sup> which crosses the building from SW to NE. The building protects the tomb of its constructor Imam Bilarab bin Sultan Al-Yaaraba, who died in 1692 A.D. The staircase leading to the tomb bears on the richly decorated entrance arch the date 1086 H./1675 A.D. This date, the earliest yet found in the palace, is historically acceptable, seeing that the constructor ascended to the throne in 1079 H./1668 A.D. on the death of his father, Iman Sultan bin Saif.

Today the building has the appearance of a large parallelepiped with a rectangular ground plan measuring about  $43 \times 22$  m., with the height varying between 16 m. and 22 m. The major axis of the construction is orientated SW—NE; at the N and S corners, i.e. diagonally opposed, the building terminates in two large cylindrical towers, which are connected with the walls of the main body of the building. The whole building is in large stone masonry work (dark grey limestone) embedded in plaster mortar and covered with a thick, ochre-coloured, sand and plaster layer. The building occupies the North corner of a larger area enclosed by a wall of unbaked brick which is entered by a doorway approximately at the East corner. Two small defence towers, one at the western corner of the wall and one at the centre of the SE side, complete the external plan of the complex (Fig. 1).

At present the area which is not occupied by the palace is crowded with very poor buildings in stone and pressed clay, covered with palm trunks and leaves. Only in the area corresponding to the entrance doorway are the remains of an arcade with architectural features similar to those of the palace itself. A small water channel coming from the East, from the nearby oasis, crosses the building in a NE—SW direction, as mentioned above.

A small, very modest building in stonework and clay, orientated approximately on a N—S axis, is today used as a mosque.

The openings in the façades, which vary in height, as has already been mentioned, at first sight seem to be almost chaotic. Rows of ogival windows, mostly with plaster gratings, contrast with rectangular windows closed with wooden shutters; the latter are not in alignment with the former neither horizontally nor vertically. The various floor levels turn out not to be in correspondence with the various parts of the same façade. In many cases the windows have been filled in, in each case with stonework, and in others the windows have been modified or reduced in size. In large areas of the four façades and the two towers the plaster has fallen away and the stone masonry work is exposed to view. At the top of the walls,



FIG 2. "Hall of the Sun and the Moon": general view.



PLATE 2. "Hall of the Sun and the Moon": the wooden ceiling. (10979/3 EG)

whatever the height reached, there are the remains of a defence battlement, completed by a series of loopholes arranged on three different levels.

On the inside, the plan features two adjacent courtyards, around which the various rooms are arranged in two or three storeys, according to the height of the construction. The majority of the main rooms, whose floor level is about 8.00 m. above the average ground level, is made up of large state-rooms covered with a flat ceiling of wooden beams (traditional in Oman). A particular feature of the rooms is the high windows which are divided into two quite distinct parts: the upper part is closed only by a plaster grating on the outside which ensures ventilation and illumination while the lower part—

almost on a level with the floor—can be closed by means of a small wooden fixture with two shutters.

The intermediate space between the two openings is closed and is in turn divided into two parts by means of wooden shelves which serve as cupboards or storage space (*Fig. 2*). The wooden ceiling is almost always intaglied, decorated and painted, often ornamented with koranic and eulogistic inscriptions (*Fig. 2*). The upper window is ogival and the intrados is covered in plaster panels, decorated with geometric motifs, moulded separately and then placed in position. Traces of floral designs painted on the plaster can also be seen (*cf Fig. 2 and Plate 2*).

The small inside doorway on the ground floor of courtyard A and all of the covering of courtyard B are characterized by polylobate arches, vaguely imitating Mogul motifs. In courtyard B the recent addition of an outside staircase to give easier access to the upper floors is evident.

Also on the ground floor, along the NW and NE sides, three particular rooms may be seen which at present have no opening at all towards the outside. They feature vaulted ceilings—decorated with the same type of plaster panels—and niches (or windows which have now been filled in) closed by plaster gratings<sup>5</sup>.

FIG. 3. *Detail of wooden ceiling.*

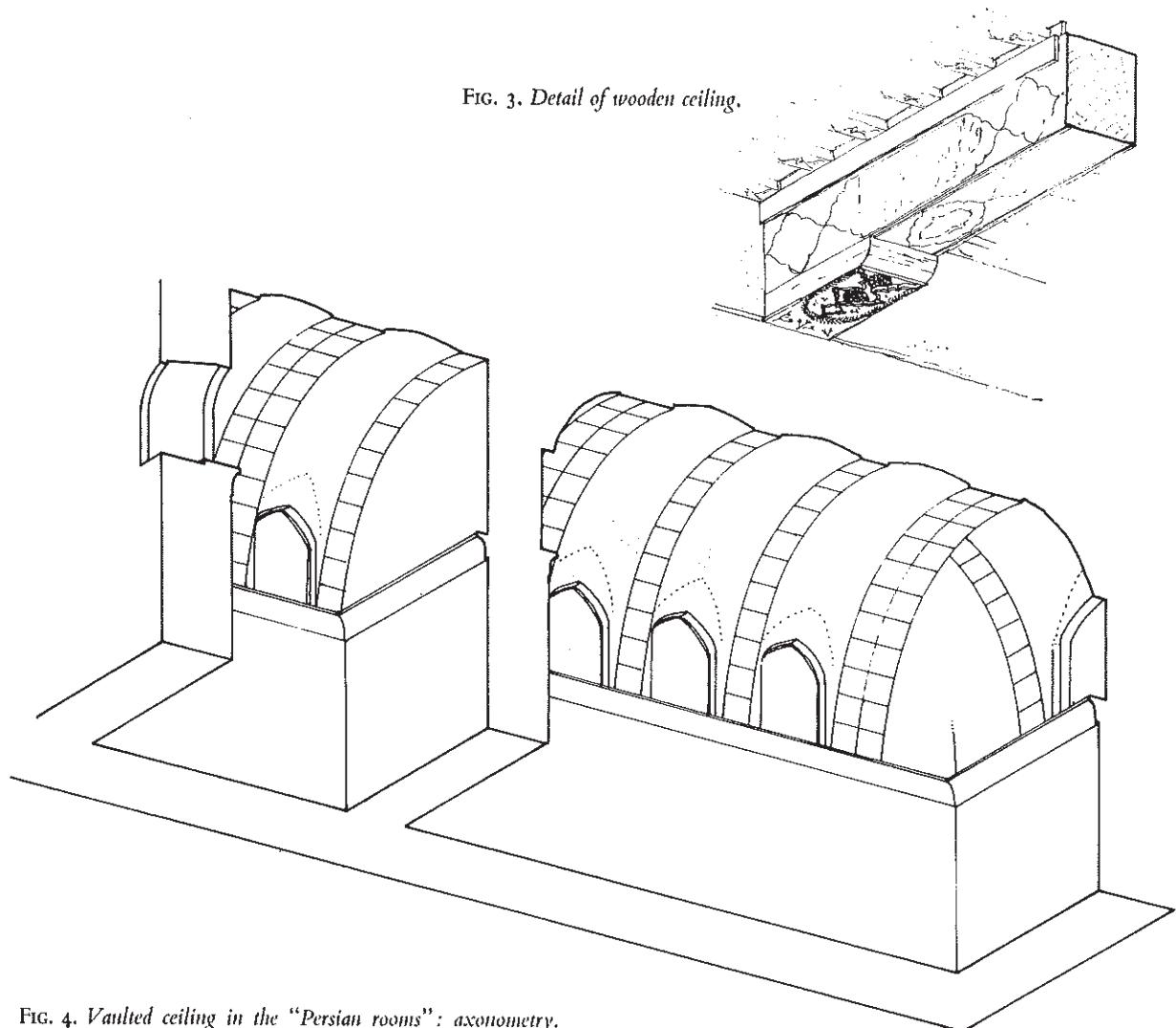
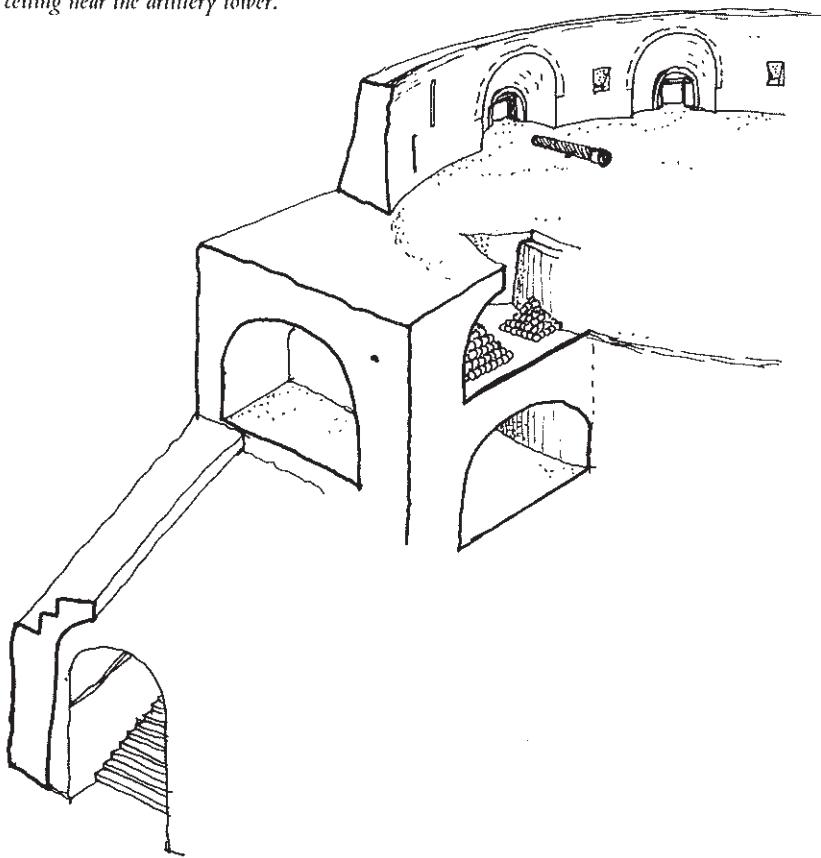


FIG. 4. *Vaulted ceiling in the "Persian rooms": axonometry.*

FIG. 5. *Barrel-vaulted ceiling near the artillery tower.*



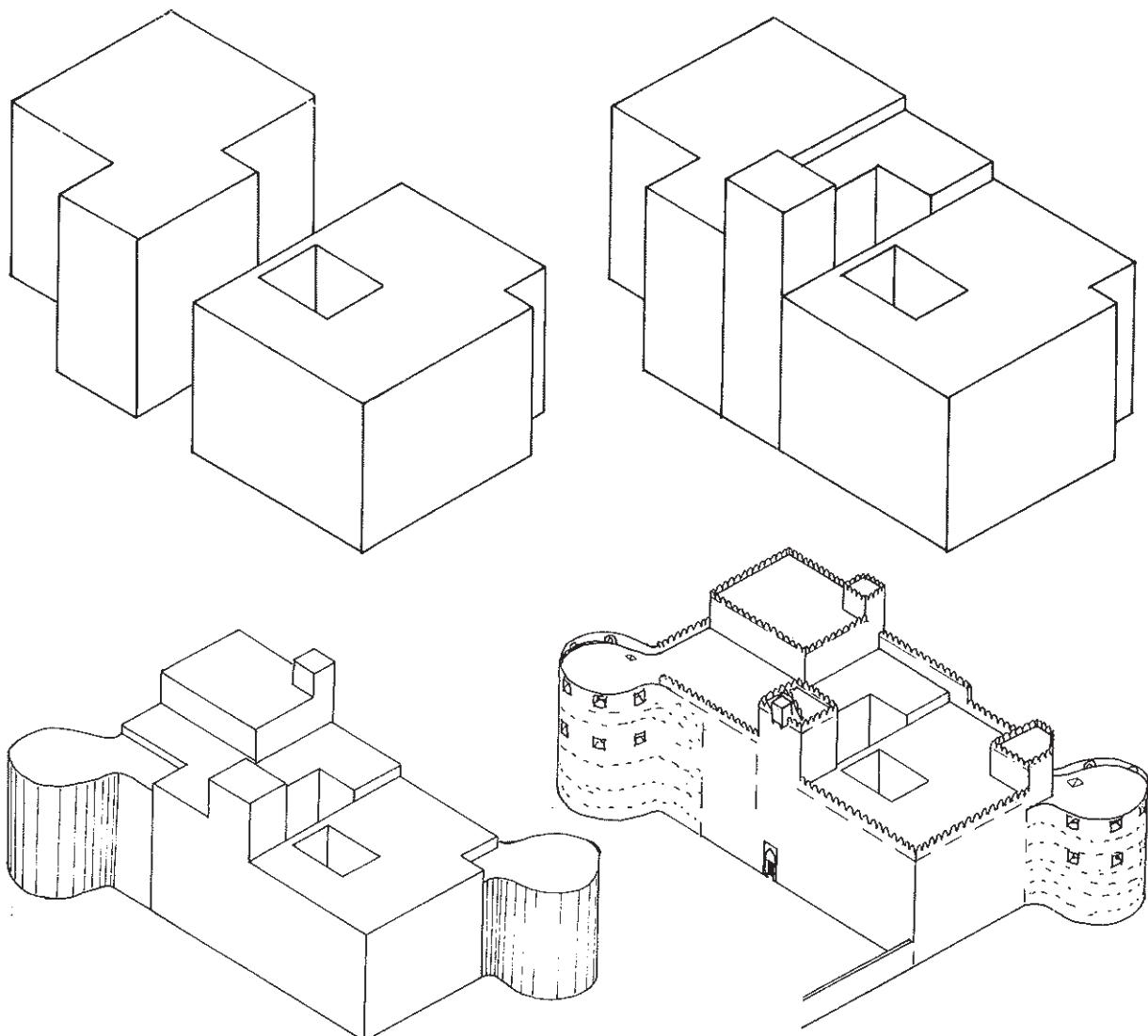
## 2—Observations on the types of ceiling.

A systematic examination of the types of covering of the various rooms in the building reveals to us the presence of only three types.

- a) A flat ceiling: it is the most common type, although the finishing varies according to the purpose for which the room was intended (Fig. 2).
- b) A vaulted ceiling with the ribs emphasized by decorated plaster panels: this type is found only in the three rooms described above (Fig. 4).
- c) A barrel-vaulted ceiling, in stone, very rough in type. It is found at the North and South ends of the building and in the corner towers (Fig. 5).

## 3—Observations on the volumetry and the building phases.

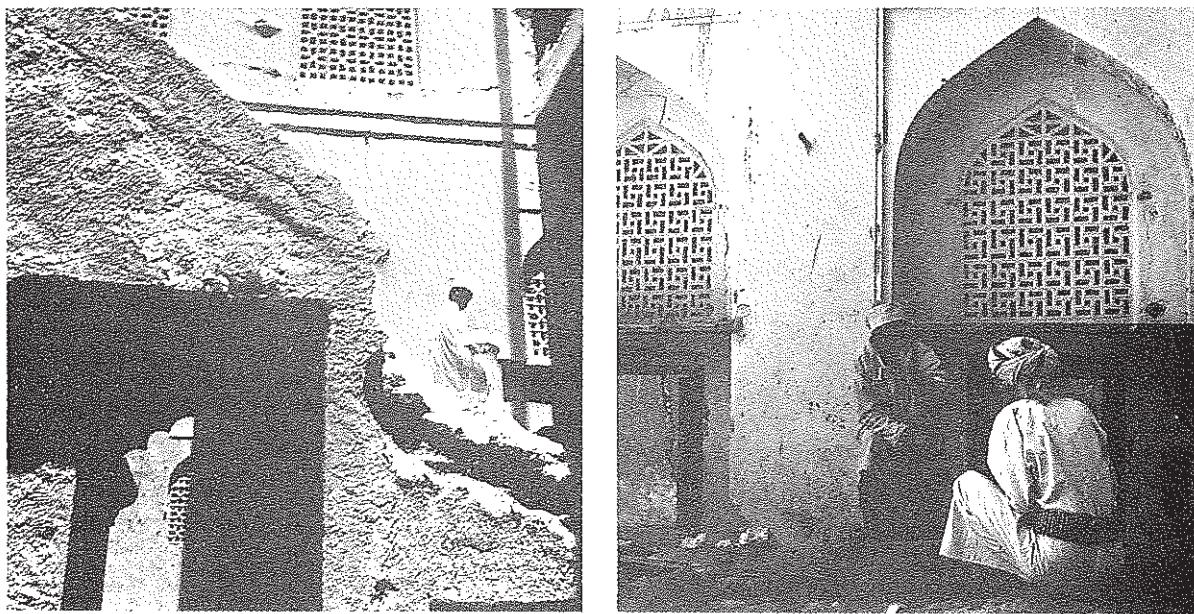
A more accurate examination of the building, both of its ground-plan and of its appearance on the inside and outside, reveals the presence of two distinct main blocks, parallel to each other with a distance of about 7 metres between them (i.e. the width of courtyard A, cf. *plan at Fig. 1*). The two blocks, perhaps built over a period of time and intended at first to be independent and isolated, were then joined together by the building of two constructions on the SE and NW sides, of which the SE one today represents the only entrance. In correspondence with this entrance the connecting construction reaches its maximum height (about 23 m.) in the form of a donjon, and is provided with a machicolation which is not partly in ruin. In a third phase, not necessarily far removed from the second, the two circular corner towers were added and also the part of the building (to the North and to the South respectively) which was necessary to



Figs. 6-9. *A tentative hypothesis of the succession of the building phases.*

eliminate the blind angles. The system of the two towers placed on the diagonal of the building is quite common in Oman as is seen from the fortress at Hazm and in a sense that of Rostaq. In *Figs. 6-9*, a tentative hypothesis of the succession of the building phases is given, an hypothesis which subsequent, more thorough investigations will be able to confirm or upset, either in part or totally.

The presence of these phases (and perhaps others) is documented by a good deal of evidence and it will not be difficult, after the necessary investigations and the indispensable historical research, to formulate a possible history of the monument. One of the most rewarding studies, in my point of view, will be the examination of the plastering which covers the whole of the building. In particular the plaster on the outside is for the most part subsequent to, or at least contemporaneous with, the latest military modifications to the palace. Many of the windows, in fact, are seen to be filled in and covered over with the same type of plaster which covers the rest of the façades. On the inside of courtyard B, after having personally scraped off some of the plaster, I was able to make out a filled-in opening between block no. 2 and courtyard A. The presence of this opening proves that all of the SW side of block no. 2 was completely open.



PLATES 3 (10979/6 EG) and 4 (10979/1 EG). Decorative motifs of plaster gratings.

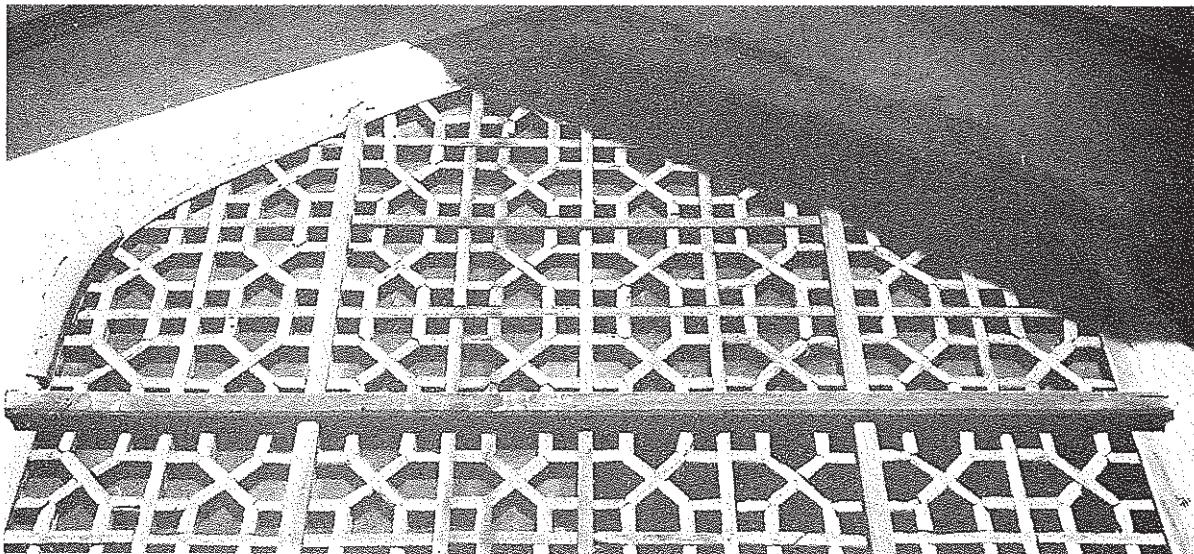


PLATE 5. Esfahan (Iran): detail of wooden gratings in the 'Ali Qapu Palace. (4796/7 EG)

#### 4—Observations on the style of some of the decorations and structures.

There is no doubt that the large-scale presence of plaster gratings with two particular decorative motifs (one a composition of squares formed by the arms of a swastika—the Persian chahar lange—and the other a composition of octagons and squares (see *Plates 3 and 4*) makes us think immediately of Safavid Persia (*Plate 5*). They are not lacking in the rest of the country (witness the houses of Masqat and Matrah, whether they be rich or poor), but the latter are mostly derived from other motifs, even classical ones. The technique of constructing the gratings is also similar to the Persian technique, although the materials are different.

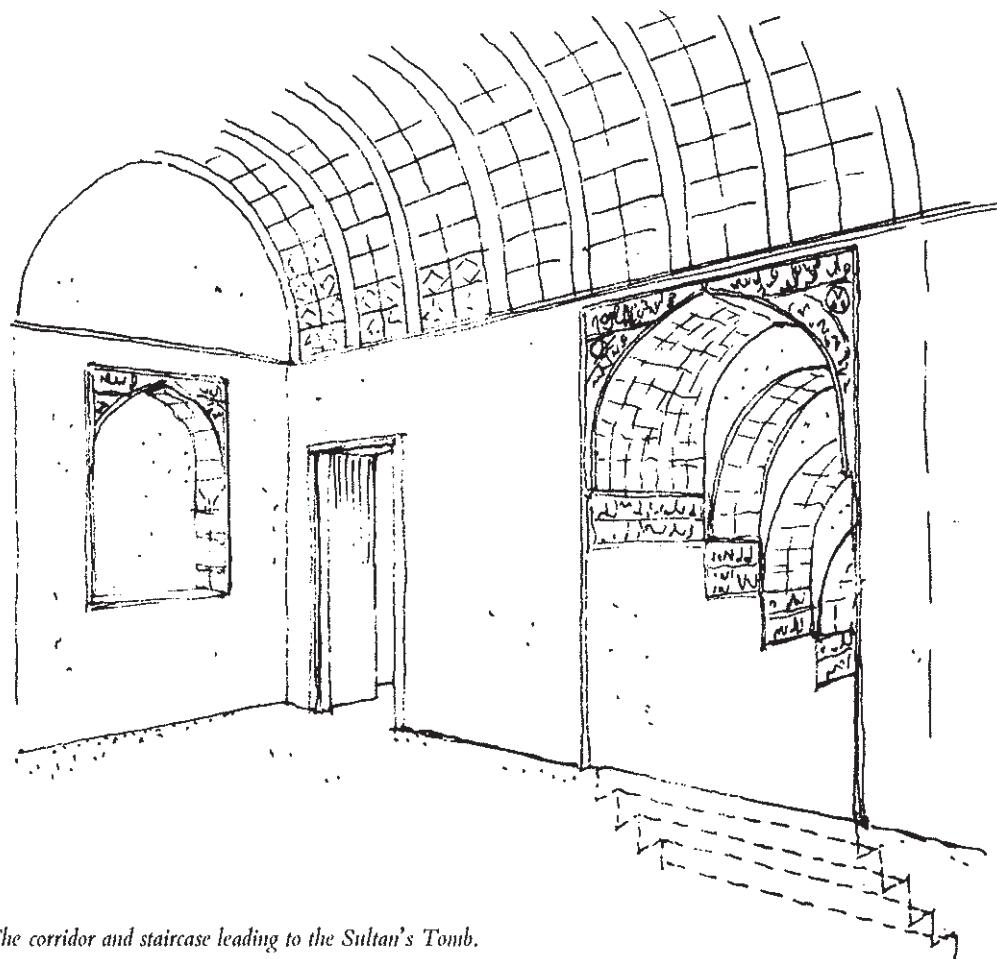


FIG. 10. *The corridor and staircase leading to the Sultan's Tomb.*

The same can be said for the other type of plaster decoration frequently used in the palace, namely the panels<sup>6</sup> used for covering the intrados in the large halls (e.g. in the Qalat al-Shams va al-Kamal) but especially in the very fine complex of the corridor and staircase which lead to the tomb of the Imam. (Fig. 10).

But, as I have already pointed out, the Persian influence is felt above all in the structure of the three aforementioned rooms situated on the ground floor of building B, whose plan is shown in Fig. 11. Not only do these three rooms constitute an isolated episode in the context of the whole building, but they clearly show a different inspiration: here it is no longer the decorated surface but the architectonic space itself which is unequivocably Persian. The structure with ogive arches, emphasized by the decorated panels, the vaults linking the arches, the arched squinches, the windows inserted harmoniously in the rhythm of the structure, the presence of the characteristic architrave band, all remind us of the finest examples of Safavid architecture. It is sufficient to compare Figs. 4 and 11 with Figs. 12 and 13 which illustrate respectively one of the rooms of the palace atrium of 'Ali Qapu at Esfahan and one of the rooms added to the pavillon of Chehel Sotun, also at Esfahan<sup>7</sup>.

Today the three rooms are completely without windows towards the outside (perhaps they were filled in at the time when the palace was transformed into a fortress) and since people have lived here, cooked, and lit fires here for decades, the surfaces are now completely blackened and oxidized. It is poss-

ible that after a thorough cleaning other decorated parts, which are now invisible, may be brought to light.

This first and necessarily brief examination of the condition of the building, and especially of its comparatively good static condition, lead us to hope for a better future for the palace at Jabrin. At the time of drafting this article I am told that the Oman Authorities, showing remarkable sensitivity and foresight, have signed an agreement for the restoration of the palace. A technical report giving the analysis of the greater part of the materials used in the building is already in the possession of the authorities

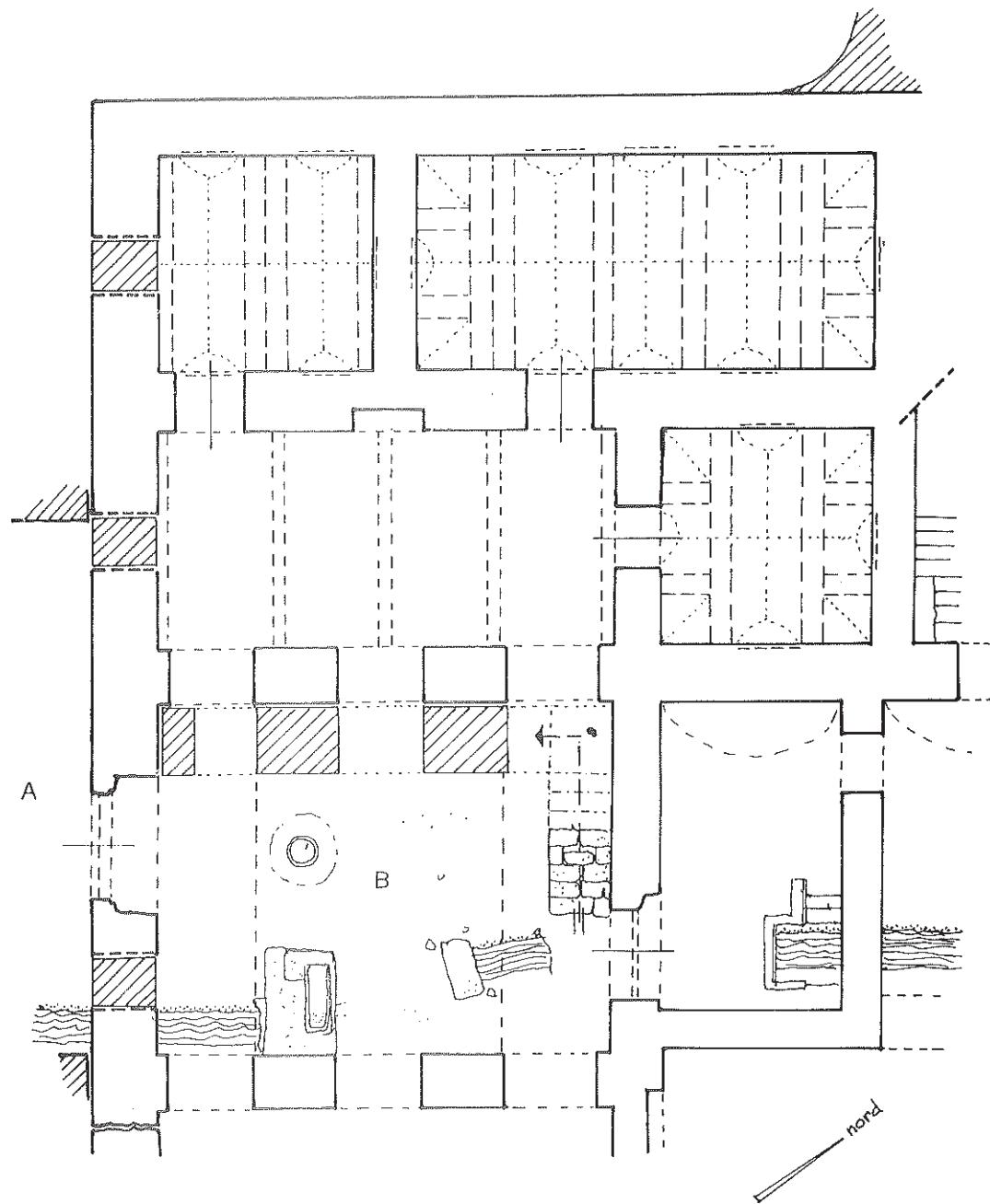


FIG. 11. Building "B": plan of the ground floor. 1:100.

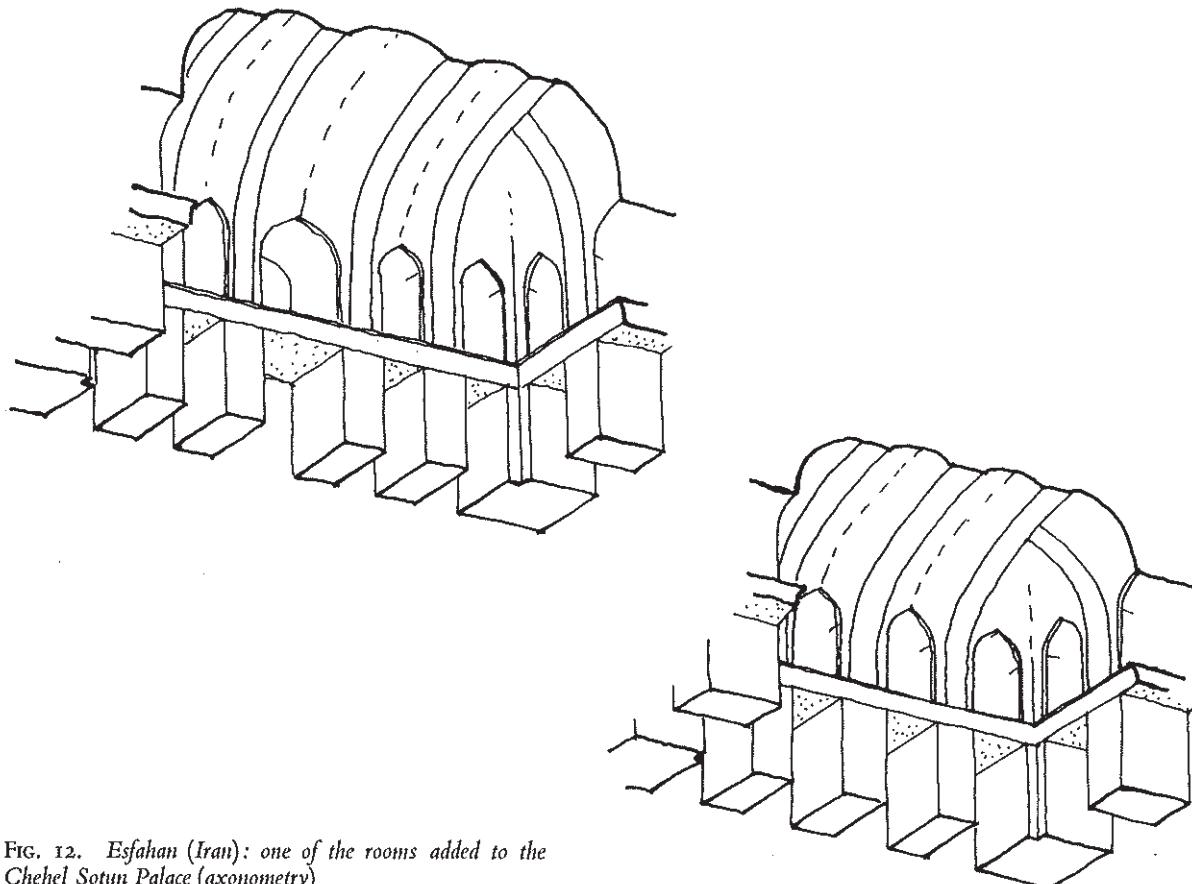


FIG. 12. *Esfahan (Iran): one of the rooms added to the Chehel Sotun Palace (axonometry)*

(a preliminary technical report on samples taken from the Palace of Imam Bilarab bin Sultan Al-Yaaraba at Jabrin, is now in the care of H. Aghajany, Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Rome, December 1974) and will be of great help in tackling rapidly the problems of conservation. It is to be hoped that the restoration work, as is so all over the world nowadays, will contribute to a precise and accurate knowledge of the stages of construction of this interesting monument. For their part, the Oman authorities can contribute a great deal of the knowledge of the monument (which, as we have seen, symbolizes a part of the history of Oman itself) by promoting, or even carrying out directly, the assembling of data closely connected with the linguistic problem,

Among the essential data could be included:

- a) a complete, systematic reading of all the inscriptions existing in the monument, room by room, together with a correct, provisional English translation;<sup>8</sup>
- b) research into all the local historical and literary sources for the purpose of seeking out and listing all possible data referring to the monument itself and in its historical-social setting.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. A. Faulkner, ARIBA FSA: *Report on visit to Oman*; a typed report dated 7-15 February 1973, drawn up at the request of the Historical Association of Oman, pp. 1-74, with sketches and plans. The plans of the Palace, with revisions by the author, are based on surveys by John Harris Associates of Muscat.

<sup>2</sup> For the name of the locality and its connections with the building of Bilarab bin Sultan, see below (note 12).

<sup>3</sup> We insist upon the civilian rather than the military characteristics of the whole complex since the subject is extremely important for the purpose of classifying the monument correctly. In any case, given the military means of the time, we have to realize that the changes made to the Palace must have been more than sufficient for the purpose for which they were designed. This is proved by the fact that, during the long and bloody struggle between Imam Bilarab bin Sultan and his brother Saif, the former took refuge in this very palace-fortress at Jabrin after the rapid fall of his other strongholds. The siege lasted for a very long time and was decided by the sudden death of the unfortunate Bilarab. Perhaps we shall never know whether the intention of Saif was really to take Jabrin and its constructor, or instead to humiliate the latter by besieging him in the palace which was also to become his tomb.

<sup>4</sup> The *falaj* is a system of underground channels by which the water-bearing stratum is reached and directed for irrigation purposes. The method, which is based on a system of minimum gradients, is analogous to the ancient Persian system, the *qanāt* from which it is directly derived.

<sup>5</sup> Rather than the design of the plaster gratings, it is the presence of these three rooms which makes us presume a definite Persian influence on the whole palace. The problems of the Persian gratings, their tracery and the techniques of execution, have been examined in a monograph published by IsMEO:R. Orazi, *Wooden Gratings in Safavid Architecture* to be published.

<sup>6</sup> Lack of time prevented me from carefully examining these panels. But at first sight I hold the view that they are plaster panels *poured* into a mould and then used as an actual facing. Both in their geometric designs and in the techniques of their construction, these panels recall the analogous ones that can be seen in southern Persia (e.g. at Yazd), following a tradition still in use today.

<sup>7</sup> In this connection see: *Travaux de restauration de monuments historiques en Iran*, ed. by G. Zander, IsMEO, Roma, 1968, p. 165, fig. 19a, b, c; pp. 191, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Often a careful reading of inscriptions, which at first sight seem to be merely koranic quotations or general encomiastic phrases (especially in the pompous language of the court in the 17th century), reveals valuable information for the history of the monument. The inscriptions, which are present in remarkable quantity in the various rooms of the palace and are all fortunately well preserved, could also conceal some examples of chronograms, decipherable with method of the *aljād* (see: *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* Leyde, 1960, s.v. *ABJĀD*; see also Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam* s.v. *DA'WAH*; Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* London, 1863-93; finally Tadj al-atus, s.v. *BDJD*). This would help a great deal in dispersing doubts and disagreements about the date of the various parts of the building. Besides it would be useful to check whether the exact name of the locality emerges from the inscriptions: in fact, there exists some doubt in this regard, as we are led to suppose from a fragment of inscription read (hurriedly) on a beam of the ceiling above the hall of the Sun and the Moon, in the western corner of the palace. No mention is made of Jabrin but of nearby Bahla (".....the houses which rise up towards the sky are very fine, but this one of the Qal'a of Bahla surpasses all of them....."). In the manuscript *al-tarikh al-'Omāni* (see note 9), of which I was in brief possession of a photo-copy on 14th May, it is said that Imam Bilarab bin Sultan built a palace for himself, completing it with a *madrasah* where he gave hospitality to poets, in the locality of Jabrin. These phrases confirm, if it were necessary, the absolutely pacific nature of the palace and the serene and active environment in which it was conceived and realized.

<sup>9</sup> Up till now, as a more recent survey of the vicissitudes of Oman which is not from Western sources, we have available only the manuscript *al-tarikh al-'Omāni* written by Shaikh Sirhan in the year 1275 H., translated with notes by E. C. Ross (Jasb, XLIII, 1874, III, 96) under the title of *Annals of Oman from Early Times to the year 1728 A.D.* For the Western bibliography, see the works cited in *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, s.v. *Oman* and *Muscat (Masqat)*, see also those cited in the brief but exhaustive and still valid chapter in C. Huart, *Historie des Arabes*, Paris, 1913, II pp. 257-282, and in the interesting booklet published in English and Arabic by the Ministry for Information of the Sultanate, *Oman*, Muscat, 1973. As a mere curiosity we should like to cite a little-known work of the beginning of the last century, attributed to an Italian: Shaikh Mansur (pseudonym of Vincenzo Maurizi), *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat etc.*, London, 1819.

(MT) photo (by helicopter) by Dr. Maurizio Tosi.

(EG) photos by Dr. Eugenio Galdieri.

Negatives are filed in the archives of the "Centro Studi Scavi Archeologici in Asia" IsMEO Roma.

