

German Archaeological Institute

Places in Time

25 Years of Archaeological Research in Syria

1980-2005

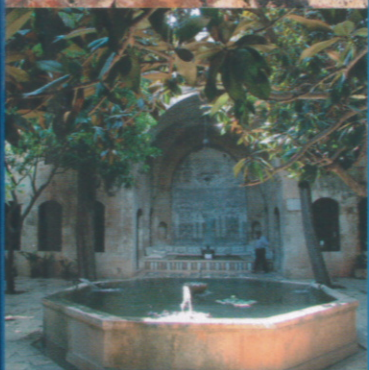
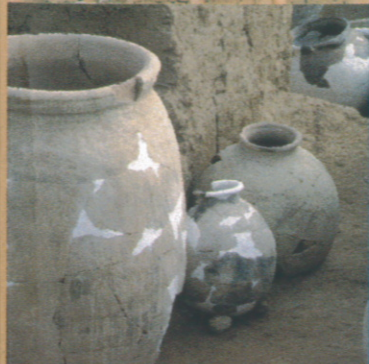




Fig. 1: Damascus 1918.

Damascus – Society, Structure and Architecture of a Middle Eastern Metropolis

Damascus today is the political and cultural centre of Syria, and, like many other urban centres in the region, it looks back upon a particularly long history of settlements and cities. Like Aleppo, Damascus is one of few metropolises of the eastern Mediterranean whose architectural substance has remained preserved in many areas (fig. 1). Correspondingly, the old city was – appropriately – the first Syrian city to be declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. The majority of buildings in the old city, mostly shops and residences, stem in their present form from the Ottoman period. Damascus was the capital of the Ottoman province of Syria (al-Sham/al-Suriya) between 1516 and 1918 and one of the most important urban centres of the empire. From the Mamluk period (1260–1516) mainly schools (*madradas*) are preserved, besides prominent monuments of the Ayyubid period (1176–1260) and the famed Umayyad Mosque (706–715).

The city's plan, nonetheless, evolved from its ancient formation and, thus, it is possible to make important observations in settlement structure from late antiquity to modern times. Accordingly, research on Damascus is divided into major areas, which concentrate on different questions and involve various methodical approaches:

1. The history of settlement of the Souk al-Sagha next to the Umayyad mosque and the Souk al-

Qutn at Bab al-Jabiya (urban development from late antiquity to the present day).

2. Reconstruction of the city after its destruction by Tamerlane (1401). Restorative measures on the Umayyad Mosque, new organisation of the Souks, development of the quarter around the Souk al-Qutn (urban development and architectural decoration).

3. Damascus after the Ottoman conquest in 1516 (urban development, architecture, architectural decoration).

4. Damascus during the Ottoman reforms in the 19th and early 20th centuries (social and administrative history, urban development, architecture, architectural decoration).

In the course of this research three major thematic areas emerged:

1. The structure and development of the Souks.
2. Architectural decoration in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.
3. Development of residential architecture in Damascus from the late Mamluk period until 1918.

The basis for research was formed by the intensive survey of late Mamluk and Ottoman buildings *intra* and *extra muros*. Thereby, special attention was directed towards the Ottoman edifices inside the city wall. Within the course of the survey a digital draft version of the cadas-



Fig. 2: al-Takiya al-Sulaymaniya (962/1554–967/1560, on the right) and the madrasa al-Salimiya (974/1566–67, left on top).

ter was completed in cooperation with the IFPO (Institut Français du Proche-Orient) in Damascus. This focussed on types of ground plans and aspects of architectural decoration, primarily in domestic houses and shops. Investigations on architectural decoration concentrated on wood panelling (woodwork), multi-coloured paste mosaics, stone masonry and murals.

Material culture is seen as the historical witness of social organisation and activity. Thus, the aim of investigation was to comprehend cultu-

ral continuity and change in Damascene society on the basis of its material remains. The study of written sources – such as the study of legal cases (*sijillat al-mahakim al-shar'iyya*) and documents of donations (*waqfiyat*) in the Syrian National Archives (*markaz al-watha'iq al-tarihiyya, Damascus*) – were an important part of investigations. Newspapers, local biographical lexika (*tarajim*) and chronicles (*yawmiyat*), administrative reports (*salname*), travel literature and consular reports provided further useful sources of information.

The results of the research outlined above are summarised as follows.

The Souk of Damascus prior to the Ottoman conquest

Investigations of the Souk al-Sagha ('gold souk') and Souk al-Qutn ('souk of the cotton merchants') have shown that urban development was similar in both areas. As previously assumed, it could be proven that during the Umayyad rule and somewhat in Byzantine times structures developed upon the foundation of the ancient city (here the *peribolos* and *decumanus*), which even today are a determining feature until today. In the area of the *peribolos* a Byzantine palace was likely built first and later replaced by the Qasr al-Khadra², the palace of Mu^cawiya ibn Abi Sufiyan (41/661–60/680). This palace function continued well into Ottoman times in some of

the successive structures, although a large area took on a mercantile character at the turn of the 11th to 12th century. This included the gold souk, which has stood on the same spot into the 20th century. The ancient theatre, remains of which were found *in situ* in the Bayt al-^cAqqad (figs. 3–4), apparently was neither utilised nor succeeded by another building until the Mamluk period. By contrast, the further development of the *decumanus* into a souk was completed through the increasing density of shops at the latest in the 12th century. In fact, parallel developments in the vicinity indicate that this had already occurred in Umayyad times. Both of these areas were restructured extensively following the Mongols' invasion and destruction by Tamerlane in 1401.

Investigations on the Bayt al-^cAqqad (today the Danish Institute, figs. 3–4), combined with the



Fig. 3: Bayt al-^cAqqad, mamluk qaʿa facade, around 1460/1470.

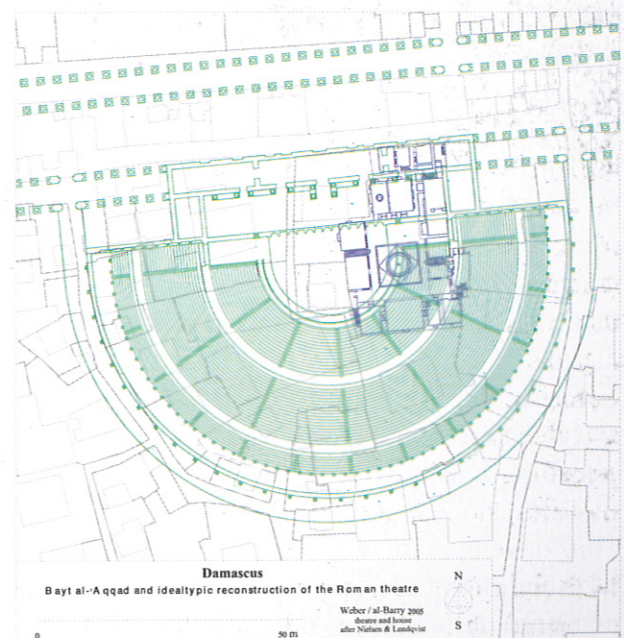


Fig. 4: Bayt al-^cAqqad and reconstruction of the roman theatre.

study of legal records and observations of the construction, have led to important conclusions about the Mamluk residential house. Although there are some unknown building elements and attributive ground plans during the ensuing development of houses in Damascus, the basic elements of the residential house as observed in the Ottoman period had already been conceived.

The 16th and early 17th centuries: the beginning of 'Ottoman' Damascus

Immediately after integration into the Ottoman Empire, a prolific building programme commenced in Damascus, which lent a new appearance to several areas of the city. Two main centres of urban advancement are particularly discernible: the bazaar and the Darwishyya street.

Numerous mosques, baths, fountains as well as a new governor's palace (*saray*) were erected along Darwishyya street, which was the major north-south axis and by-pass in the west. There, the city's inclusion in the Ottoman Empire, at that time at the peak of power as a centralised state, is most evident. Integration in the far-reaching empire led to an economic upswing, that was manifested in the commercial buildings of the city. To the west and south of the Umayyad mosque governors invested in shops and businesses, thus forming a new mercantile centre of the city.

This development was initiated by high officials and dignitaries, yet the major buildings of that time derived from donations bestowed by governors or the sultan himself. In the process

concepts of Ottoman architecture were adapted. The first mosque with a central dome, a typical feature of Ottoman architecture, was contracted by a Damascene scholar. From then on, schools and khans also corresponded to the structural principles that were known in Istanbul, Anatolia and the Ottoman Balkans. This applies in particular to the most Ottoman edifice of the city, the Takiya of Sultan Sulayman (1520–1566) (fig. 2). During the second half of the 16th century elements of Ottoman architectural decoration increasingly found their way to Damascus and were combined with local decorative and constructional techniques. Hence, as of the late 16th century a specifically local Ottoman style had developed in Damascus.

Although very few residential houses are preserved from this time, a few houses or parts thereof evidence a continuity in Arab domestic architecture. Thereby Mamluk techniques in decoration were adapted and developed further. Determined by local traditions and the available building materials, structural elements evolved – such as the representational reception hall (*qa'a*) – that are regionally very distinctive. The Qa'at al-Imadi, dated to the early 17th century, closely resembles Egyptian reception halls, thereby differing clearly in construction and decoration from corresponding rooms built in northern Syria and Lebanon. The development of residential houses culminated in a standardised form after the second half of the 17th century, changing little until the 19th century.

The florescence of local architectural decor in the late 17th and 18th century

Urban development of the late 17th and early

18th centuries was determined mainly by the architects who were contracted by the local elite. The most prominent of these local notables was the ʿAzm family, several members of which were governors of Damascus between 1724 and 1808. They built expansive residences, splendid khans, baths and schools in the trade centre of the city, though no mosques. All of these buildings corresponded to Ottoman prototypes or variations thereof, yet they were distinguished in the form and techniques of their architectural decoration, which can be seen as an explicitly local style. This process reached a climax with the khans of Sulayman Basha (fig. 5) and Asʿad Basha al-ʿAzm. The latter with its four massive columns and nine domes followed an Ottoman spatial scheme as known in the 'Galata Bedesten' of Istanbul by the 15th century. In Damascus this was defined anew and transferred to the type of khan. Here the interior organisation follows Ottoman prototypes, yet the local character of the building appears in the pronounced horizontal stripes in the facade (*ablaq*), unknown in Istanbul.

The often postulated cultural and political decline of the Ottoman Empire is relative when seen from the point of view of an Arabian provincial capital. The many monumental trade buildings, schools and baths as well as the numerous elaborately furnished residences are evidence of the height of prosperity in Damascus in the 18th century. Hereby a type of ground plan evolved, in which individual elements were always combined in different ways, yet which was essentially standardised or even uniform, more so than the plan indicated by preserved buildings from the early Ottoman period of the 16th and ear-



Fig. 5: Khan Sulayman Bascha al-ʿAzm, 1145/1732–33, view from c. 1920.

ly 17th centuries. Nearly all of the houses from this time display costly painted wood panelling (*ʿajami*) and rich multi-coloured paste decoration, a Damascene technique. Some motifs attest a direct exchange with Istanbul, but the development in architectural decoration was mostly local without external influence.

The 19th and early 20th centuries: modernisation of an Arab provincial capital

In the course of extensive reforms and modernisation programs of the Ottoman state, particularly after the provincial reforms of 1864, Damascus underwent great change. The city council was integrated into the administrative structures of the province as an institution for urban planning. This council of selected Damascenes built several large projects: more than seventy schools, eight hospitals and clinics, four train stations and a comprehensive urban infrastructure. Located at a short distance from Darwishiyya street, the Marja square (fig. 6) gradually grew into a new urban centre with several administrative buildings (the town hall, the courthouse and the land

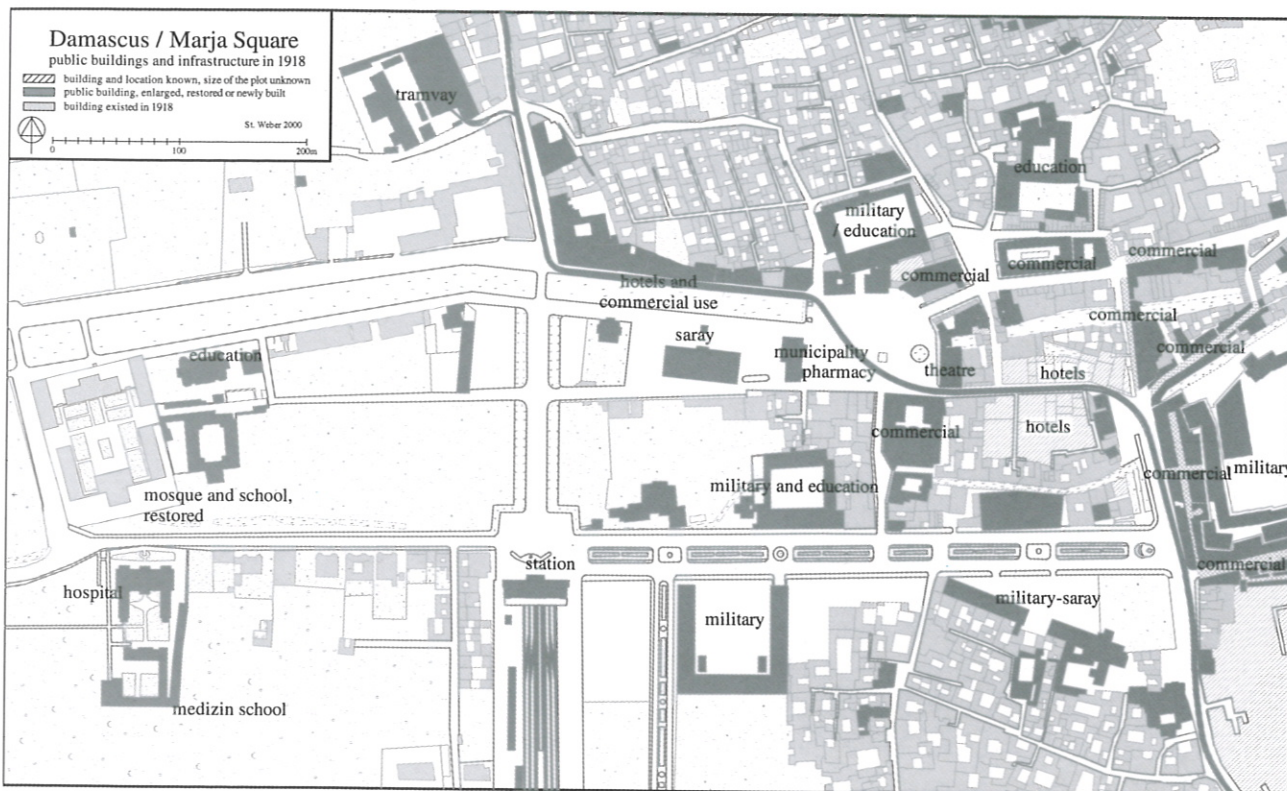


Fig. 6: The Marja-Square, reconstruction 1918.

registrar), city parks, hotels, coffee houses and a theatre.

At the same time the entire bazaar of Damascus was modernised and its previously narrow alleys broadened into shopping streets, resembling contemporary European galleries. The city council's most significant undertaking in the modernised bazaar was the 450 m long Souk al-Hamidiyya, constructed in two building phases during the 80s and 90s of the 19th century .

The same persons who were active in the modernisation of the bazaar modelled their homes according to new ideas and designs. Nearly all of the houses investigated in the research pro-

ject were found to have been renovated or rebuilt in the 19th or early 20th century. In 1895 the building inspector on the city council noted that in that year 35 houses were built and 527 houses were renovated. New techniques and forms in decoration from Istanbul were integrated into buildings, replacing the local predecessors completely. The ground plan of an Arabian house with courtyard was modified, and with its Anatolian Konaks a wholly new type of residence was introduced to Damascus. In numerous cases, such as the Bayt al-Quwatli or Bayt al-Yusuf, renovation could be attested in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The process of modernisation also penetrated private spheres of life, bringing models of interior ar-

rangements besides clothing from Istanbul and Europe. Especially the murals that ornamented Damascene walls from the early 19th century onwards provide an impression of the inhabitants' awareness of the outside world. Aside from views of cities like Istanbul and Paris, symbols of the new age were themes in murals, for example, telegraph lines, steam ships etc. Even the first airplane that landed next to the Takiya al-Sulaymaniyya (fig. 7), is pictured on the wall of a Damascene residence.

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Fig. 7: Airplane that landed next to the Takiya al-Sulaymaniyya, is pictured on the wall of a Damascene residence.

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- Fig. 1: Weber 2002; Fig. 2: IFPO, 1935.
Fig. 3: Börner, Chahine, Haddad, el-Khoury, Weber 2004; Fig. 4: Weber/al-Barry 2005, Theater und Haus nach Nielsen & Lundqvist.
Fig. 5: TU Dresden; Figs. 6–7: Weber 2000.