



Introduction

The Urban Legacy of the Middle East

History books tell of caliphs, sultans and kings. Damascus and Baghdad, the capital cities of the two first Islamic empires, those of the Umayyads (40–132 A.H. / 661–750 C.E.) and the Abbasids (132–655 A.H. / 750–1258 C.E.), are inseparably linked to royal personalities. Yet those rulers did not act alone. In fact, the major cultural developments in the Islamic world were primarily due to scholars, doctors, writers, notables, merchants and magistrates based in a supra-regional network of cities. The history of many of these cities had started long before the religions of Islam or even Christianity arose. Indeed, the oldest cities in the world are to be found in the Middle East.

Muslims, Christians and Jews came to live together in these cities, and all of them built their houses, streets and markets shaped by the diverse cultural traditions of the region. These traditions soon started to blend, especially with Islam spreading rapidly across the Southern Mediterranean and into Asia. Arab armies had already conquered many parts of the Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and Persia soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. In 92 A.H. / 711 C.E., Muslim troops crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, the Oxus in Central Asia and the Indus. As the early Islamic world empire expanded, supra-regional, cultural exchange and fusion occurred with the new polity now engendering new forms of urban organisation.

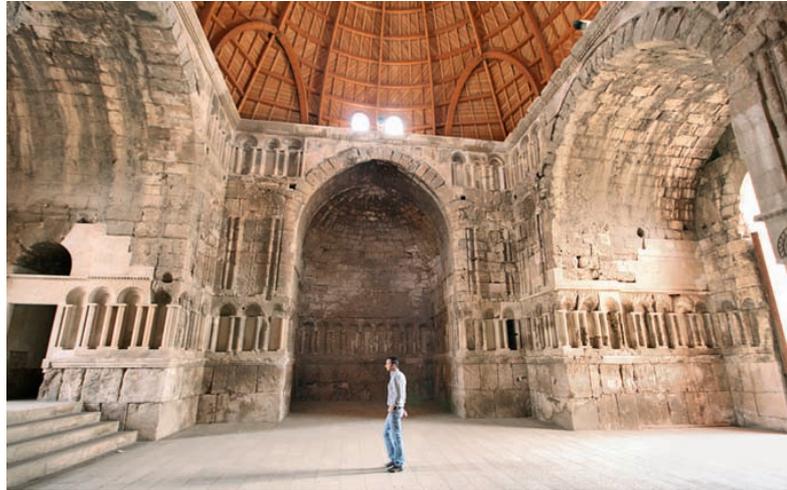
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Fig. 1: The suq of Aleppo (Syria), before its destruction, walking on the Hellenistic and Roman city plan in the Suq al-Jumruk of the 10th century A.H. / 16th century C.E. Photo: Weber 2007.

Fig. 2: The Mosque of Harran (Turkey), in what was once the last residential city of the Umayyads, today a romantic



Fig. 3: The Umayyad Palace of Amman (Jordan), the entrance hall of the inner palace with a four-*iwān* ground-plan, common in the Persian realm. Photo: Weber 2011.

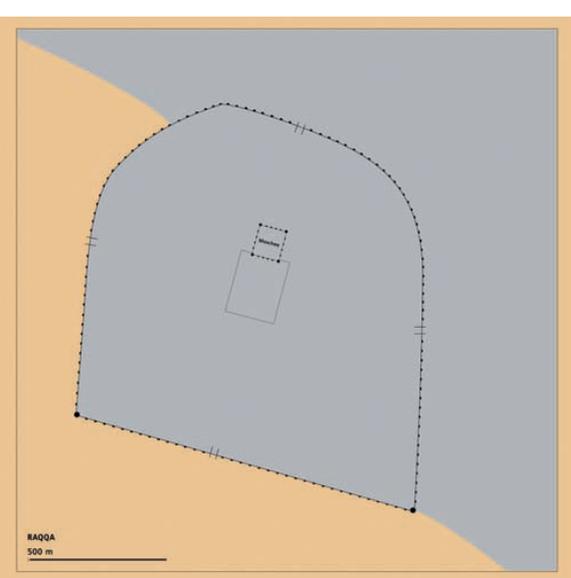


Right after the successful capture of a region, military bases were built to secure the conquered lands. Such military camps—like Kufa, Basra or Kairouan—soon developed into major urban centres. Since most of their original urban fabric did not endure and has been rebuilt constantly, our knowledge of their appearance is very limited.

In the Palestinian-Syrian region, many cities experienced a new flourishing after Damascus became the capital of the Umayyads, the first Muslim dynasty, in 40 A.H. / 661 C.E. Ancient and late Antique city structures were preserved and continued to evolve. This can be observed in Aleppo for example, where the parallel suq alleys can be traced back to ancient street patterns (Fig. 1). In Aleppo, Jerusalem or Damascus, you go shopping today in the same streets as people did 2,000 years ago. Damascus, as well as two other late Umayyad residence cities, Rusafa and Harran (Fig. 2), eventually lost influence due to new political circumstances arising in the wake of the Abbasid Revolution in the East. Indeed, the latter two were eventually destroyed by the Mongols during the 7th century A.H. / 13th century C.E. and disappeared altogether in the mire of history.

The caliphs of the second Islamic empire, established by the Abbasids, stood out as founders of cities—not in Syria, which now was no longer the centre of the new power, but in the empire’s Iraqi-Iranian territories. Consequently, it was now eastern traditions that served as sources of inspiration. To start with, the founding of Baghdad as the new Abbasid capital in 144 A.H. / 762 C.E. was intended to supersede the ancient pre-Islamic capital of Ctesiphon (al-Mada’in) and render it insignificant. Nevertheless, its architectural heritage—the concept of the round city, the *iwān* architecture and the stucco cladding—became an inspiration for early Islamic architecture (Fig. 3). Baghdad, or better Madinat al-Salam (the City of Peace) as it was originally called, was set up according to the pre-Islamic concept of the round city as a symbol of universal power—or at least the claim to it. We do not know what Abbasid Baghdad exactly looked like, since our knowledge of its round city is based solely on written sources, but we do know that—as the centre of a world empire—Baghdad soon counted more than one million inhabitants and soon expanded far beyond the boundaries of the original site.

Fig. 4: The city of Raqqa (Syria), schematic plan, residential areas marked grey (not to scale).



As a result of such rapid demographic expansion, Baghdad soon got too crowded for some caliphs. Thus al-Mansur, the founding father of Baghdad, gave the order to build the satellite residence of Raqqa in 152 A.H. / 770 C.E. The urban layout of Raqqa was not round but rather resembled a horseshoe (Fig. 4). The city wall, a magnificent city gate and the Great Mosque are partially preserved. On the outskirts of Raqqa, the famous Caliph Harun al-Rashid later built his own sprawling residence. Eventually, in 221 A.H. / 836 C.E., the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tasim (217–227 A.H. / 833–842 C.E.) founded yet another new capital. Samarra—*Surra man ra'a*, 'pleasure-to-see'—was situated some 125 km north of Baghdad and soon developed into a gigantic city system over a length of almost 50 km along the Tigris river. With its vast palaces and monumental buildings, it was the political centre of the empire for almost six decades. However, in the end, a financial crisis forced the caliph and his court to return to Baghdad, and Samarra was finally abandoned in 278 A.H. / 892 C.E.

There were many other early Islamic cities of note, like those spread across the Persian and Central Asian regions of the Islamic empire. In the West, we must note the great cities of Islamic Spain, especially Córdoba and Seville, which belonged to Islamic polities that had long been flourishing independently from central caliphal control (Fig. 5). Indeed, by the 4th century A.H. / 10th century C.E., the Abbasids had lost their grip on large sways of the empire established by the Umayyads, and in a sense their return from Samarra in the late 3rd century A.H. / 9th century C.E. marks the beginning of their relentless descent into political dependency and impotence, as new independent empires originated in North Africa, Syria and Iran. Egypt seceded from the Abbasid empire under the helm of Ibn Tulun, the former Abbasid governor (254–270 A.H. / 868–884 C.E.) (Fig. 6). Eventually, in 333 A.H. / 945 C.E., the Buyids conquered Baghdad and took effective control, leaving the Abbasid Caliph politically isolated. A new era of sultans began.

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Fig 5: The Great Mosque of Córdoba (Spain), the famous prayer hall built between 167 A.H. / 784 C.E. and 376 A.H. / 987 C.E. Photo: Weber 2010.

Fig. 6: The Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo (Egypt), built between 262 A.H. / 876 C.E. and 265 A.H. / 879 C.E. with the Mamluk ablution fountain of the 7th century A.H. / late 13th century C.E. Photo: Weber 2011.

