

**PART 1**

**THE SYRIAN EXPERIENCE**



I visited many historical sites, as any other tourist might, in order to assess them by gleaning the information available from both tourist books and on-site interpretation. In the early 1990s, there were few books or other information available to the general public, and the tourist guides were pleasant but generally uninformed. At that time the only reliable book was that written by a former General Director of Antiquities and Museums of Syria in Damascus, Afif Bahnassi. Although his *Guide to Syria* is well informed at a limited level, the technical information of the sites is credible.<sup>1</sup> A more recent book *Monuments of Syria*, by Ross Burns, is both scholarly and informative.<sup>2</sup> Burns, an historian and archaeologist, brings credible research to the reader. His intention is to “guide the visitor through the layers of history,” and “to explain Syria’s history and its place in a region of bewildering cross-currents through its monuments and historic sites.”<sup>3</sup> His first chapter, “Syria - Historical Sketch,” is admirable, and the coverage of all the sites in the country is extensive. His rating of the sites for tourist visitation is denoted by asterisks: “\*\*\* = essential, \*\* = well worthwhile, and \* = worth a detour if time allows.”<sup>4</sup> This rating system continues with a simple dash “-”, which means “limited or specialist interest;” and “T”, with the meaning “of interest for historical topography of site.” This system is misleading, as it is not an indication of the significance of the site, but rather a comment on its visual impact for general tourist interest. The book gives an account of the site’s significance, but often lacks explanatory information regarding its conservation and particularly its present condition.

Another publication produced about the same time as the first edition of Burns’ book, is *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide* by Warwick Ball.<sup>5</sup> Ball is also an archaeologist, and brings a scholarly approach to his descriptions. As expected from the book’s title, the emphasis is on the historical and architectural information, and with a small input of tourist direction. His critical descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> Afif Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria* (Damascus: al-Salhani, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria* (London: I.B.Tauris 1999, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Warwick Ball, *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide* (New York: Interlink Books, 1998).

are balanced and informative, and he avoids rating his sites for visitation, and therefore avoids creating a preconceived expectation for the viewer.

Examples have been selected to present a general panorama of major historic periods, and to illustrate particular aspects of conservation as they relate to conservation philosophy, the presentation of the remaining fabric and the information conveyed to the viewer. It is not intended to cover the sites in great detail, but rather to succinctly refer only to those aspects relevant to this thesis. In addition, little argument is presented at this stage regarding the condition of the conservation examples, as these will be referred to in the relevant sections later in the thesis.

The sites fall into two categories: first four ancient archaeological sites presented in chronological order; and secondly, three urban centres, which, although their histories stretch back to ancient times, are today thriving centres of current social and commercial interaction. One example forms a link between the purely archaeological sites and the present-day urban centres. Each of these examples attract tourist visitation by both organised tours and casual visitors.

The sites forming the present studies have been chosen to represent a broad spectrum of sites covering nearly five thousand years, covering the time span from the third millennium BCE to the present. The examples have been selected to particularly illustrate conservation and presentation techniques that have been employed. A summary of their geographical setting and historical context is given with a short discussion on the important factors that constitute the site's significance. The physical remains, which form the on-site evidence, together, where appropriate, with their relationship to artefacts and other evidence, and the attraction that they offer are discussed. The present condition of the sites, and the conservation action employed, including the physical conservation, interpretation and presentation are referred to, but are further discussed in greater detail throughout the relevant sections of the thesis.

## 1.2 Legislation Regarding Antiquities

The *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie* (Regulations Regarding Antiquities in Syria) is Statutory Order No. 222, (Appendix I) and was produced in 1963 by the Ministry of Culture and National Direction for the general management of antiquities and museums.<sup>6</sup> The document was produced with the assistance of the French government, but no reference is made to any earlier documents relating to rules for the practice of archaeological excavations. The UNESCO *Recommendation on International Principles Applicable to Archaeological Excavations* was produced in 1957 – 58, but the Syrian *Régime* does not refer or bear any resemblance to this document. Antiquities are defined in the *Régime* as “movable objects and immovable edifices constructed, produced, written, designed or drawn by man before 200 A.D. (Christian era) or 206 (Hegira era).”<sup>7</sup> The dates stated in this article are restrictive, covering only antiquities from before 200 CE, covering all sites in antiquity, to 821 CE.<sup>8</sup> Why 200 CE has been specifically chosen is not stated, but it is not of concern, as this makes no difference to the extent back in history. Given that the Muslim calendar is based on a lunar year, the Hegira date of 206 equals 821 CE. This is unusual, as this year does not relate to any important Islamic event or other commemoration. However, this dating does not present a problem, given the following sentence of article 1: “The Antiquities Authorities also have the power to deem as antiquities movable and immovable objects of a more recent date having historical or artistic characteristics or being of national interest.”<sup>9</sup> The approach of the Authorities is to consider all significant sites and objects as Antiquities under the Act, and applicable to the Regulations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ministère de la Culture et de l’Orientation Nationale, *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, (Damascus: DECRET – LOI No. 222, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 1.

<sup>8</sup> The Muslim Hegira dates from 622 CE, commemorating Muhammad’s flight from Mecca to Medina, and hence the date 206 equals 828 CE.

<sup>9</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 1.

<sup>10</sup> General comments regarding the application of the Regulations were expressed by Sultan Muhesen, the Director General of Antiquities and Museums in 1999.

Immovable antiquities are defined in Article 3:

The immovable antiquities are those which are anchored to the ground such as: natural or excavated caves which served the needs of ancient man, rocks on which he executed drawings, sculptures or inscriptions; ruins and ancient towns; constructions buried in the latter, historical monuments built for diverse reasons such as: mosques – churches – temples – palaces – houses – hospitals – schools – citadels – fortresses – ramparts – stadia – theatres – caravanserais – baths – tombs – aqueducts – barrages and the vestiges of these monuments and all attached to them, like doors, windows, columns, balconies, roofs, entablature, capitals, conveniences, altars and funerary stelae.<sup>11</sup>

They are generally referred to throughout the document as “archaeological sites” and “historical monuments”. The term “monument” is used in the European sense, as shown in the *Venice Charter* (1964), and recalls the French influence on the Syrian *Régime*.

Movable Antiquities form the subject of Chapter III of the *Régime*, and their trading is covered in Chapters V and VI. Given the complexity of the management and ethics regarding movable antiquities, this requires much further study, and falls outside the scope of this thesis.

The *Régime* says very little regarding conservation of the sites. The UNESCO *Recommendation* has one article that refers to conservation, stating that the deed of concession “...should, in particular, provide for guarding, maintenance and restoration of the site, together with the conservation, during and on completion of [the] work, of objects and monuments uncovered.”<sup>12</sup> The date of the Syrian legislation is 1963, one year before the *Venice Charter*. The requirement for conservation may have been overlooked, or may have been in the minds of the French drafters that the on-coming *Venice Charter* would be sufficient to ensure

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<sup>11</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 3 –A.

<sup>12</sup> UNESCO, *Recommendation on International Principles Applicable to Archaeological Excavations*, 1957-58, Article 21.

conservation. Article 13 in the *Régime* does state that the “...Antiquities Authorities have the right to determine, with a view to their protection and restoration, which elements of the archaeological sites, historical monuments and ancient town quarters ... must be preserved.”<sup>13</sup> The Article continues with the requirements of recording and registration of the said elements, with the requirements for restrictions and the notification of these requirements. These requirements, being within the same Article, convey the impression that this registration and recording constitutes the “protection and restoration.”

Restoration and maintenance remain the responsibility of the Antiquities Authorities, to which they claim sole right for the action. However, they do agree to some right of the proprietor or owner to some repairs and restoration, under the surveillance of the Authorities. Some allowance is also made for the apportioning of the costs of restoration and maintenance.<sup>14</sup> The owner does not have the right to destroy, displace even in part, or to restore, renovate or modify in any way at all, without prior authorisation of the Authorities.<sup>15</sup> These are the only requirements for conservation in the document, with the sole responsibility vested in the Authorities, but with no other direction given for conservation action. And this document remains to the present day as the only guideline for conservation for listed monuments in Syria.

### **1.3 Archaeology and Conservation Practices**

Conservation in the past was not seen by archaeologists to be of importance. Fortunately this attitude has now changed with the realisation that with increasing research and sophisticated technology, further investigation of the site cannot be dismissed. This demands that site evidence be conserved in a manner that will not compromise its authenticity. Although conservation is not usually of interest to the general public, the manner in which it has been done, or not done, has the potential to confuse the viewer. It is not always easy to match a book’s description with the visual display. Again, the significance assigned to the sites is often based

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<sup>13</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 23.

on visual qualities considered to be of interest to potential tourist visitation, with the real significance receiving comment, but not necessarily being elaborated upon to a point equal to the site's significance.

The crucial part of the science of archaeology is the interpretation of the evidence, and the chosen sites from Syria, are examined to determine how successfully these sites present that interpretation. The written reports of the archaeologists are not generally made available to the general public, so site information has to rely on site information boards, descriptions contained in travel books, and verbal information given by a tourist guide.

We begin with Ebla and Mari. Both sites have left extensive libraries of clay tablets giving a remarkable record of history, daily life and a comprehensive insight into the culture of the period. The tablets and all other notable artifacts have been removed to museums for safe keeping, however, the mud-brick remains of the former grand building complexes have so little to present to the viewer, they are given a low ranking by Burns and Bahnassi. They are both cases of the significance of a site being ranked on visual qualities by the tourist industry. Even if the sites are visited, their interpretation may not convey the important message, and the opportunity for the full understanding of their real significance is lost.

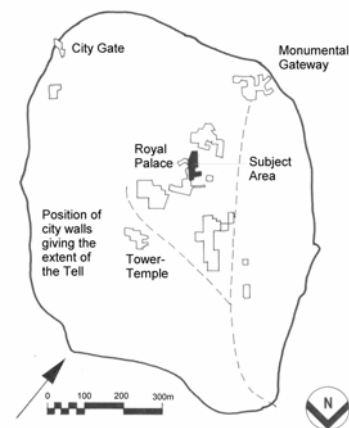
The excavated ruins of the ancient cities of Ebla and Mari bear witness to their close relationship as vital cities of one of the oldest civilisations on earth – a Semitic empire that had reached its peak in c.2500 BCE. They both present similar conservation problems, but with contrasting conservation answers. Ain Dara represents an Iron Age site, particularly centred on the “Neo-Hittite” period c.1000 BCE. It is a specific case of mismanaged conservation, now presenting a confusing message to the viewer. Dura Europos is a particularly important example of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and presents several conservation examples ranging from 1930s to the present day. It also illustrates attitudes towards conservation before charters were introduced to bring conformity to conservation action.



Bosra is an unusual “link” case between ancient ruins and present day urban living and conservation. The fabric of the ancient heritage formed the habitation for a small number of the local population. This brought the conservation process into line with urban conservation as well as that required for an archaeological site. When visited in 1997 urban conservation had not arisen, only archaeological work had proceeded on the many relatively small sites around the town. The observations on Bosra were intended to be presented as both a warning and a possible direction for conservation action. During the progress of this thesis (2002), official action was taken negating the chance for the warning, and the opportunity for a site-specific conservation response was lost.

### **Ebla (Tell Mardikh)**

The site is marked by a large low *tell* (Figs.2 and 3), that contains the encircling walls, and well within the central citadel, containing two extensive sets of ruins. The royal palace on the west side of the citadel is the best preserved of these ruins, and forms the major focus for the tourist. The outer walls are 30metres thick and still attain their original height of 20metres in some places.<sup>16</sup> The construction of the walls and the buildings are of mud brick. Although being aware of Ebla through Sumerian and Akkadian inscriptions of the third millennium BCE, it was the reference on the monument of the Temple of Karnak by Pharaoh Thutmoses III that brought it to the attention of modern archaeologists when the hieroglyphics were deciphered. Its position still remained a mystery until the mid 1970s.



<sup>16</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 122.

**Fig. 2.** Ebla: aerial view. The date given is 2250 BC. Postcard from Aleppo.

**Fig. 3.** Ebla: plan redrawn from Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 121.

Excavations began at Ebla in 1964 by an Italian team headed by Paolo Matthiae, and is recorded in his book *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered*.<sup>17</sup> But it was not until 1975 and again in 1978 that major archives were found which projected Ebla into world recognition and controversy. The archives produced in excess of 14000 clay tablets recorded in Akkadian cuneiform writing in a hitherto unknown language now referred to as Eblaite.<sup>18</sup> The translation of these tablets has progressed slowly, but the early translations, amounting only to approximately 600 tablets, identified Ebla as a major centre in the Early Bronze Age period, reaching its peak c.2400 - 2250 BCE, and revealed its inter-relationships with other kingdoms and city states in this area of the fertile crescent. The present-day significance of Ebla now focuses on the translation of these tablets, as their information has already changed the previously accepted Bronze Age history of the Middle East, and Syria in particular.<sup>19</sup> *Ebla* by Chaim Bermant and Michael Weitzman, details the controversy surrounding the translation of the Ebla tablets, an issue that brought both fame and notoriety to this project.<sup>20</sup>

The controversy centres around the interpretation of the tablets as “proving” certain Biblical stories, particularly the Genesis tales relating to Abraham and Ishmael, and referring to, and therefore vindicating the existence of the “Five Cities of the Plain”<sup>21</sup> including the infamous towns of Sodom and Gomorra.<sup>22</sup> Although Matthiae has gone to great pains to refute these assumptions, the arguments and counter-arguments have never been resolved. However, in spite of the notoriety of the tablets, there is little on the ground to illustrate this aspect of Ebla’s significance. Burns states, “This may be one of the most important Bronze Age sites discovered since the Second World War but it yields few of its secrets to

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<sup>17</sup> Paolo Matthiae, *Ebla: An Empire Rediscovered* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 151. Wilson claims 15000 tablets, with a further 1600 later, *Ebla Tablets: Secrets of a Forgotten City*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 121. These statements are also echoed by Matthiae, Bermant and Weitzman, and Wilson.

<sup>20</sup> Chaim Bermant and Michael Weitzman, *Ebla* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Genesis, Chap.14, v.2.

<sup>22</sup> Clifford Wilson, *Ebla Tablets: Secrets of a Forgotten City* (San Diego: Master Books, 1981), 36.

the naked eye.”<sup>23</sup> The mud-brick ruins, although extensive and interesting in their sculptural forms cannot convey to the viewer the site’s true significance. (Fig. 4). Apart from Burns’ statement, “The history of Ebla and its place in the Bronze Age civilisations of the area (including its relations with the Old Testament world) is a fascinating piece of historical reconstruction marked by considerable controversy,”<sup>24</sup> he makes no further comment, particularly on the nature of the controversy.



**Fig. 4.** Ebla: mud brick ruins. (Author: 1999)

Bahnassi in his *Guide to Syria* does not refer to either the controversial interpretations of the tablets, nor comments on the ruins of the site or their condition. However, in his later book *Ebla Archives* (1993), he argues very strongly against the Biblical references; but more of this will be said later. Burns rates this site with one star, being “worth a detour if time allows.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, in spite of the site yielding little visual significance, it is included on tourist routes, and draws many visitors. This gives some indication of the interest that can be engendered in ruins for their own sake. But if the controversy is known, visitation is prompted, through associated evidence, to see the very place where the physical traces relating to the ephemeral arguments are grounded.

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<sup>23</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

The Italian team has implemented a conservation program aimed at preventing the mud-brick walls from deteriorating by rendering them in weak plaster. In one way, weak plaster is a good choice as a remedy, as it allows easy removal should further investigation become necessary, and, being a weak mix, does not present the danger of structural incompatibility. However, although representing a similar finish to the walls as the original finish - and some remnants of the original plaster can be seen under a protective roof (Fig. 5), the lack of interpretation information confuses the understanding of these original buildings. Some believe that the new plaster is the original plaster.<sup>26</sup> Others expect to see the mud-brick construction, even though the construction and finishes are not specifically described in the guidebooks.<sup>27</sup> The current presentation is a picturesque vernacular style hand-plastered finish, which unfortunately has areas of plaster now spalling off due to its weak mix, and hence to some extent, negating its purpose. (Fig. 6). This conservation method will require constant maintenance, a situation that, unless the Italian team continues in the future, the Syrian authorities will find a constant drain on their resources.<sup>28</sup>



**Fig. 5.** Ebla: protective roof over the original plastered wall. (Author: 1998)

**Fig. 6.** Ebla: new protective plaster spalling to reveal original mud brickwork.(Author: 1998)

Ball remarks that although there is not much for the visitor to see, the site is still a must for any visit to Syria.<sup>29</sup> His reason is the sheer antiquity of the city, stating: “Below one’s feet are the fragments of a civilization so old that it was already ancient when our own cultural forbears, the Romans, walked over here 2,000

<sup>26</sup> Personal comment from a senior lecturer at the Amman University during a lecture I gave in 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Personal comments from archaeologists accompanying me on my visit to the site, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Personal comment from Dr. Sultan Muheysen, Director of Antiquities of the National Museum, Damascus, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Warwick Ball, *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide* (New York: Interlink Books, 1998), 138.

years ago.”<sup>30</sup> He refers to the significance of the tablets (he claims 17,000 in number), but does not refer to the mud brick construction or the plastered finishes.

### **Mari** (Tell Hariri)

The present-day far-flung position of Mari belies its original pivotal significance as the political centre of Mesopotamia and upper Syria during the Early to Middle Bronze Age. Its significance rivals that of Ebla, both during its apogee, and today as a major source of political, economic and social information revealed through a substantial archive of Babylonian cuneiform tablets.<sup>31</sup> Beginning in c.2900 BCE, Mari went through a series of upheavals and periods of power, until its final demise in 1757 BCE.

Today, Mari is known mainly through its widely published plan of the so-called Palace of Zimri-Lim. This was one of the most impressive and best-preserved palaces of the Early Bronze Age to be unearthed in Syria, constructed mostly of mud-brick. It was not only extensive in plan (approximately 275 rooms covering 2.5 hectares) but impressively tall; some remaining walls reaching 5 metres in height.<sup>32</sup>

Excavations began in 1933 under the French archaeologist André Parrot and continued under his direction until his death in 1974. Excavations have continued by the French since that time. Sadly, and contrary to the descriptions given in several tourist books, for example Burns’, only a small group of rooms, approximately a dozen or so, exist under an open shelter of metal framing and pyramidal plastic roofing (Fig. 7). The rest of the extensive remains are now gone (Fig. 8). Burns succinctly states that the mud-brick remains, which “. . . have been successively peeled off to expose the preceding layers beneath, are difficult to appreciate.”<sup>33</sup> However, an official opinion is hinted at by Bahnassi who writes: “Unfortunately, your visit to Mari may not be too spectacular, as all these constructions, for the main part erected with raw bricks, crumbled down rapidly

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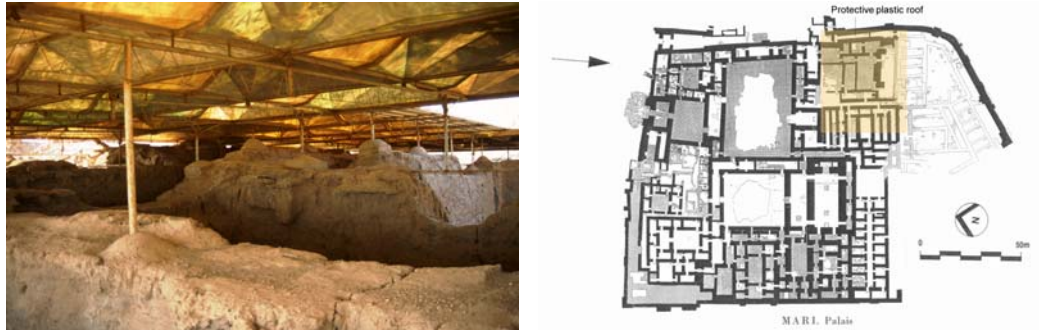
<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>31</sup> Burns states 15000 tablets, *Monuments of Syria*, 156.

<sup>32</sup> Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, 227.

<sup>33</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 155

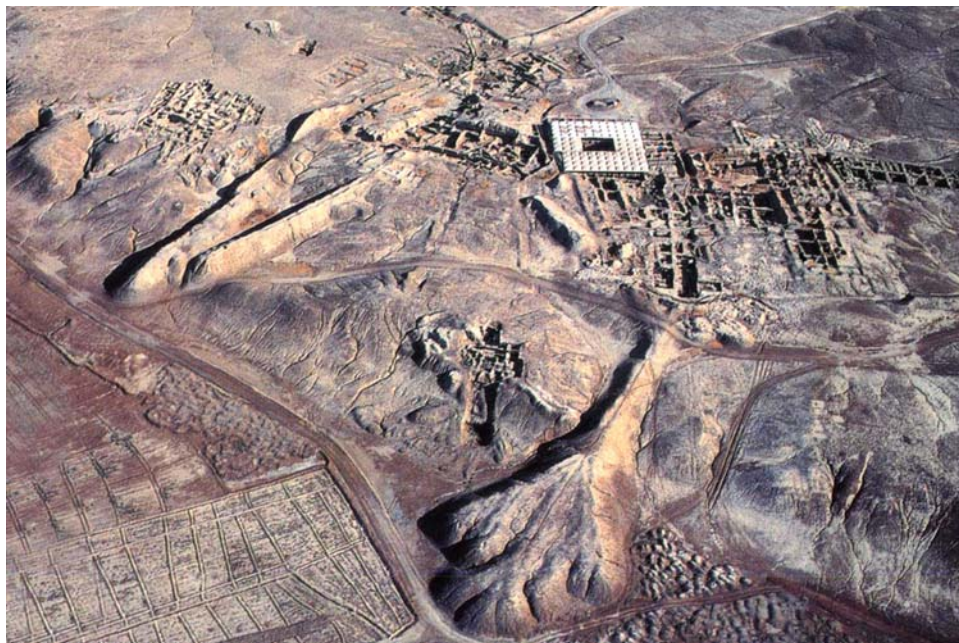
after their unearthing.”<sup>34</sup> The problem however was more bluntly stated by the Director of Antiquities in the National Museum of Damascus as simply, “they [the ruins] are all gone...they have been washed away ...they are gone!”<sup>35</sup>



**Fig. 7.** Mari: protective plastic roofing over the remaining mud brick walls. (Author: 1998)

**Fig. 8.** Mari: the usually published plan of the Palace of Zimri-Lim, showing the extent of the original rooms – 90% of which no longer exist. André Parrot, *Mari: Collection Des Ides Photographiques 7*, (Paris: Ides et Calendes, 1953). Plan III.

Ball gives a good historical background, and reproduces the complete plan of the palace accompanied by a succinct description. He does not refer to the present extent of the ruins, so once again the information imparted bears little relation to the visual experience.



<sup>34</sup> Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, 227

<sup>35</sup> This comment followed my question to the Director as I had received conflicting information. An archaeologist (not from the French team) said they had been back-filled, but the Director emphatically denied this.

**Fig. 9.** Mari: excavations, aerial view. The protective plastic roofing can be seen, and covers the only remaining portion of the ruins. The direction of the view is shown in Fig. 8. Postcard from Aleppo - no information given.

An undated postcard, easily available for purchase in Aleppo, shows Mari in a better condition than it now enjoys (Fig. 9). No date is given, but the only section now remaining is that under the plastic hood clearly visible in the photo. This alone creates a false expectation for a potential viewer. The remaining small example of the formerly extensive ruins is impressive in its height and material (the mud brick construction can be easily appreciated), but, with the exception of Bahnassi, the information given, not only in the tourist books but more seriously in scientific journals and archaeological books, for example, *Mari* by André Parrot, refers with the map only to the original extensive palace, and the visitor is not prepared for the depleted exhibit.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the site is still a tourist destination, even though most of the expected palace ruins can no longer be seen, let alone appreciated. In addition, the amount of information given on site is minimal, with no reference to the valuable collection of artifacts housed in both the museums of Aleppo and Damascus, and in particular, the cuneiform tablets – the most significant aspect of this site.

Currently a French and Syrian team is continuing work and removing the plastic roofing. As with Ebla, they are applying a mud plaster finish to the walls as a conservation measure, in an attempt to prevent further loss.<sup>37</sup>

### **Ain Dara**

The site of Ain Dara is a large *tell* situated in the north of Syria. Although the excavated ruins cover many historic periods, (stretching from the first millennium BCE to the relatively recent Umayyad period 8c CE, but excluding the Roman period), its greatest significance is centred in the temple of the Neo-Hittite period of the 10th-9th centuries BCE.

Following the discovery of a monumental basalt lion in 1955, excavations were carried out by the Syrian Department of Antiquities, with recent help from

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<sup>36</sup> Andre Parrot, *Mari* (Paris: Éditions Ides Et Calendes, 1953).

<sup>37</sup> Personal Comment by Muhammad Ali, Director of the Aleppo Museum, May 2002.

Japanese archaeologists. The excavations revealed a substantial basalt temple, elevated above the general ground level as a platform, with an entrance flanked by carved lions and an extensive plinth of carved lions and sphinxes (Fig. 10). Although the building itself is graced with a myriad of bas-relief sculptures, a number of free-standing sculptures have also been found. These and the four giant footprints engraved in the paving of the entrance have suggested that the temple was held in esteem in its time, possibly being dedicated to Ishtar, the Semitic goddess of fertility for whom the lion is often portrayed as a symbol.<sup>38</sup>



**Fig. 10.** Ain Dara: Plinth of lions and sphinxes. (Author: 1998)

The site was exposed to the weather during and after the excavation periods. Whilst forming an impressive archaeological site for tourist visitation, the setting has recently (c.1995) been compromised by clumsy attempts at conservation. It was found that the basalt bas-reliefs were seriously deteriorating. Following their exposure, the surfaces of the sculptures were spalling off, due probably to the action of diurnal temperature extremes. The approach adopted was to encircle the temple with a ring of concrete columns, with the intention of covering the whole site with a concrete dome. The columns were founded on concrete piles held together with a large concrete ring beam. The exposed columns were neatly

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<sup>38</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 28.



finished with stylised classical capitals. The temple is situated very tightly on the crest of the *tell*, and the installation of the columns by necessity had to be close (too close) to the temple structure (Fig. 11). This resulted in damage to the temple during the piling and construction of the columns. Given further structural difficulties, the dome was never constructed. The structure has destroyed the site's stratigraphy, and still remains in its uncompleted form. Further attempts to remove it would only cause further structural and stratigraphical damage<sup>39</sup>



**Fig. 11.** Ain Dara: the proximity of the new concrete columns to the ruins. (Author: 1998)

The whole attempt is now referred to as “a disaster.” This was the term used on three separate occasions, once by the Director of Antiquities (Damascus), again by Kheireddin al-Rifai, a noted conservation architect in Aleppo, and also by the Director of the Aleppo Museum. The blame appears to fall squarely with the Syrian Government, whilst the Japanese archaeologists vehemently disclaim all involvement and responsibility.<sup>40</sup> Burns succinctly refers to this attempt at conservation: “a Syro-Japanese project is seeking to consolidate and restore the relief panels of the temple base.”<sup>41</sup> He further comments, “While it is difficult to distinguish the various levels of occupation of the sizable mound, the site is

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<sup>39</sup> Personal comment from Muhammad Ali, Director of the Aleppo Museum, May, 2002

<sup>40</sup> Personal comment from a Japanese archaeologist. Emotions run high over disasters of this kind, and arriving at the correct story can often be very difficult.

<sup>41</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 28.

littered with carvings.”<sup>42</sup> This illustrates the selectivity of presenting one aspect of a site whilst ignoring other aspects that, even of a lesser or even no significance, have the potential to confuse the viewer. It is now the intention of the Department of Antiquities to rescue this situation.<sup>43</sup> Given the difficulty of removing the columns, it now remains to be seen how this site will be presented to the public.

### **Dura Europos**

Dura Europos represents another great archaeological find of historical and artistic interest. The very extensive site comprises Hellenistic and Roman ruins enclosed within massive city walls, being situated on the west bank of the Euphrates River.

Excavated from the early twenties onwards first by a French team, and from 1928 to 1937 by a French-American expedition, the ruins reveal the historical and political influence this settlement had in the region. This alone would be enough to ensure its archaeological importance to Syria, but it was the discovery of the Judaic Synagogue and Christian church in a remarkable state of preservation together with their unprecedented wall paintings that brought world recognition to this site. Burns writes: “The Dura Synagogue has had a major impact on the appreciation of the development of religious iconography in the first centuries of our era, ...reinforced by the discovery of a house converted into a Christian chapel - the earliest recognisable Christian cult centre in Syria, also richly decorated with wall-paintings.”<sup>44</sup>

Hopkins, the American site director of the later expedition, records in his book *The Discovery of Dura Europos* the difficulties which would result from any attempt to leave the Synagogue standing with its paintings in the desert. The fate of the Synagogue and the Christian chapel clearly illustrates attitudes to archaeological thinking of the time. Hopkins displays this attitude when his sole concern focuses on how to remove the most significant finds, including the entire Synagogue building, back to America. He records the discussions with the Syrian authorities in which a final deal is struck - that Syria can retain the Christian

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>43</sup> Personal comment from Muhammad Ali, Director of the Aleppo Museum, May, 2002

<sup>44</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 118.

chapel in exchange for America taking the Synagogue. He details the success of the difficult work in removing the panels of paintings and the mud-brick walls that formed the backing for the paintings.<sup>45</sup> However, at the last moment, the Syrian Government switched the deal, and, “regrettably” the Syrians kept the Synagogue and the chapel was taken to Yale University.<sup>46</sup>

The dismantling of the Synagogue and its removal to the National Museum of Damascus and its re-erection makes fascinating reading.<sup>47</sup> The Synagogue has been reconstructed in the museum’s courtyard, and although removed from its original site context, the glory of the Judaic paintings can still be appreciated in their original configuration. The chapel on the other hand has been stored in a basement at Yale University, where it has deteriorated beyond any hope of recovery.<sup>48</sup>

All of the building traces at the site of Dura Europos have deteriorated over the past sixty years, and have exonerated the removal of the Synagogue to Damascus, even though this conservation action is frowned upon in present day practice. Both the Venice and Burra charters refer to the relocation of historic buildings in cautionary terms. It is an action that should be used only as a last resort - where the safeguarding of the monument demands it, or as the sole practical means of ensuring its survival.<sup>49</sup> But the current problem is that the Synagogue remains, albeit an excellent artifact, removed from its context, and presented without interpretive measures relating it to its site. A simple notice in the museum gives no appreciation of its location within the Dura Europos site, or an explanation of its removal to the museum. Burn’s book has a plan of the site showing the position of the Synagogue, but not that of the church.

Ball has an excellent historical description of Dura Europos, and simply says that as the main building material was mud brick, “it does not have the immense

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<sup>45</sup> Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura-Europos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 204.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-7.

<sup>48</sup> Personal comment from an archaeologist who has worked in Yale University.

<sup>49</sup> *Venice Charter*, ICOMOS, Paris, 1964, Article 7; and *Burra Charter*, Australia ICOMOS Inc. 1999, Article 9.1.

quantity of remains standing above the ground that [the great Graeco-Roman] cities had.”<sup>50</sup> He refers to “superbly preserved frescos” in the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, which can now be seen in the museums of Damascus and Yale.<sup>51</sup> He refers to the synagogue, now to be seen in the Damascus Museum, and he also refers to the church. He speaks of the church in the past tense, referring to its significance as the oldest dated church in the world, and that it contained “Christian symbols depicted on the walls, [and] a bishop’s ‘throne’ and a stone basin presumably used as a font.”<sup>52</sup> He does not mention the removal of the church, or its condition today. His account includes a map of the whole site, showing the position of the synagogue, but not that of the church. His description of the church gives its position as “just a few blocks away” from the synagogue. Hence even with Ball, confusion surrounds the viewer regarding place, time and condition of some of the main exhibits of this important site.

The deterioration of the site of Dura Europos can be clearly seen in photographs taken for publication at the time of excavation and their comparison with present day viewing (Figs. 12 and 13) Little on-site interpretation material exists, and although the great extent of the site can be appreciated, there is little else remaining to inform the visitor of the site’s significance. Again it is included on tourist itineraries, and has a considerable visitation.



**Fig. 12.** Dura Europos: view of the stoa area. (Author: 1997)

**Fig. 13.** Dura Europos: view of the stoa area following excavation. Clark Hopkins, *The Discovery of Dura Europos*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 84.

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<sup>50</sup> Ball, *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide*, 172.

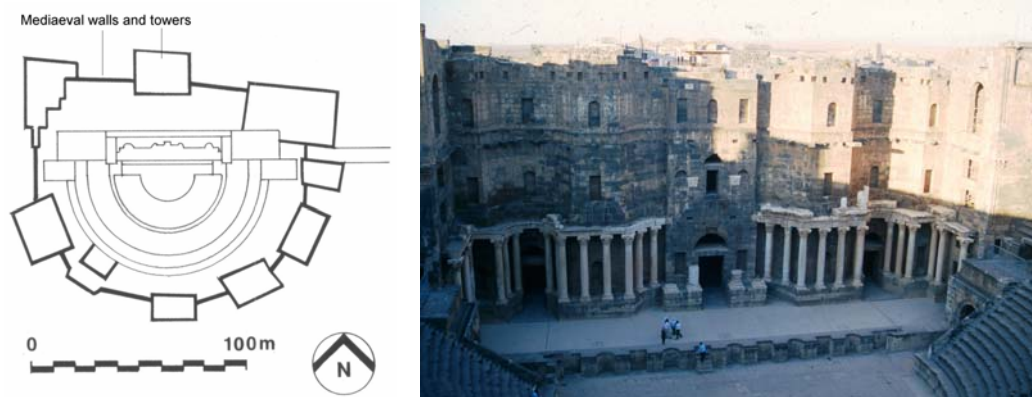
<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-4

Burns reports that: “A re-examination of the Dura site is currently underway through the work of a joint Franco-Syrian mission, one of whose more urgent tasks is to arrest the damage done to the site since the exposure of its buildings to the elements since the 1920s.”<sup>53</sup> It is confirmed that this work is now proceeding.<sup>54</sup>

## Bosra

Bosra is situated 140 km. south of Damascus close to the Jordanian border. It was a onetime capital of the Hauran—a former fertile region known as the “granary of Syria.” The historic precinct contains extensive remains of the Nabatean, Roman, Byzantine and Arabic civilisations, and has been entered on the World Heritage List. (Appendix 2)



**Fig. 14.** Bosra: plan of the theatre enclosed within the mediaeval fortress. Redrawn from Burns, *Monuments of Syria*. 63.

**Fig. 15.** Bosra: the *scaenae frons* of the theatre. (Author: 1996)

Its greatest relic is the Roman theatre, considered one of the most well preserved theatres from the Roman period, and of further importance as it is encapsulated within an Ayyubid fortress, dated early thirteenth century CE (Fig. 14). The form of the fortress is a series of massive towers enclosing the theatre. There are few extant examples of Roman theatres having been adapted to mediaeval fortresses, and Bosra remains the most complete example, still retaining both substantial mediaeval and Roman evidence. Bahnassi states that during the Ayyubid period a mosque was erected on the place of the stage. This would have constituted a

<sup>53</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 118.

<sup>54</sup> Personal comment from Muhammad Ali, Director of the Aleppo Museum, May 2002.

feature that would have added further considerable significance to the theatre complex in historical terms.

Bahnassi does not refer to the removal of the mosque, but states that the theatre has now been “magnificently restored by the Directorate of Antiquities of Syria.”<sup>55</sup> (Fig.15) Burns however, states, “At the beginning of this century, much of the interior of the theatre had been filled with sand deposited by the wind over the centuries, a further stroke of good fortune which accounts for the theatre’s preservation.” He then refers to the restoration work as “Having removed the debris and some minor Arab additions, the main restoration work was devoted to the stage area and the upper rows of seats.” One is left to wonder if the “minor Arab additions” were in fact the mosque.

A Finnish architect, Söderlund, like so many visitors, is obviously overwhelmed by the theatre, but records his concern for authenticity:

Even the colonnade on top of the cavea is still partially standing and the theatre is ready when so ever to receive 9000 spectators. Only the second and third floors of the columnations of [the] *scaenae frons* are missing. Partially this spectacularly excellent state is, though, an illusion resulting from fundamental reconstruction works lasting altogether 23 years (1947 – 1970).<sup>56</sup>

In addition to this concern for authenticity the restored theatre leaves many questions unanswered. For example, how was the theatre used during the mediaeval period? If the stage was used as the mosque, how was the extensive *cavea* area used? Did this area only provide access to the surrounding towers that had been built as the mediaeval fortress extensions? The restoration of the mosque on the stage may have given some clue to these questions. Such information would have added considerable significance to the complex. The restoration now gives two conflicting messages - the theatre as it was during its theatre time, and

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<sup>55</sup> Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, 135.

<sup>56</sup> Aaro Söderlund, “A Field Architects Experience in the Middle East,” in Aarne Taivanum (ed.), *Proceedings of the Finnish Institute in the Middle East* (Vantaa, Tummavuoren Kirjapaino Oy, 2001).

the mediaeval fortress as it was in its time, with no indication of how the two worked together.<sup>57</sup>

The rest of the ancient ruins in Bosra are quite extensive, and their condition varies from very good down to incomprehensible. Within the Roman wall which bounds the site lie significant Byzantine church ruins and several very early and historically significant Islamic mosques. The old centre of Bosra is entered on the World Heritage List, being one of only four such entries for Syria. Appendix 1 gives the heritage citation and description for this site.



**Fig.16.** Bosra: houses built among the ruins. (Author: 1996)

Burns devotes seven pages to Bosra, carefully detailing its many and varied sites, but fails to mention the most remarkable feature of the site - the occupation over many centuries of the local population within the ruins. Warwick Ball remarks on this: “interspersed among the ruins is a modern small town, with scenes of daily life that have not varied much since Bosra’s heyday. More than most sites,

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<sup>57</sup> Another example exists of the Roman theatre at Gubbio in Italy being used as a fortress during mediaeval times. Documentation describes the floor that was placed at the *Praecinctio* level, and the lower *summa cavea* and *orchestra* used as the dungeon. Personal comments from Professor Frank Sear during measured drawing seasons at Gubbio, 1990, 1991 and 1993. Regettably, all this was “restored” out of existence in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century to reveal yet another pure Roman theatre.

therefore, ancient history comes alive in Bosra.”<sup>58</sup> Steps from the original road surface to the upper “footpath” still overlaid with column drums and capitals, led to humble houses tucked in among the Roman walls. (Fig. 16) The local people were still using the ancient structures as the foundations for their habitation. Even though they continued to use the built fabric they could not be considered a continuation of the Roman culture, but rather had achieved a cultural identity of their own. The circumstances that led to their squatter status are lost to history, but it afforded an interesting example of the reuse of historic fabric. This, however, had not caught the imagination of the various travel book writers, and the Department of Antiquities, which concentrates on recognisable ruins and antiquities, had also ignored the squatter residents and their curious culture. Not surprisingly, the squatters are not mentioned in the World Heritage List citation.

But an opportunity existed here to allow the present population to continue their habitation in the ruins and to bring another dimension to the understanding of a present-day culture in the context of an ancient built fabric. However, the ancient fabric was seen as a conservation priority, and in late 2001 the squatter population was expelled. The reason given was that they were using the ancient stone to build their houses and therefore had to be re-sited.<sup>59</sup> The Syrian *Régime* allows the Antiquities Authorities the right to evacuate people from archaeological sites with or without compensation.<sup>60</sup> Even though today there is in excess of 200 sites of Roman ruins in the world, few, if indeed any other squatter experiences like that in Bosra exist. The expectation that ancient ruins must, above all else, be preserved, has seen the demise of this unusual resident population, which in itself presented considerable social significance.

#### **1.4 Present-day Cultures and Urban Conservation**

The foregoing examples are of archaeological interest and relate to past and “dead” cultures. Bosra was an example of the remains of an ancient culture being appropriated for present day living. The following reviews recent examples of

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<sup>58</sup> Ball, *Syria: a Historical and Architectural Guide*, 74.

<sup>59</sup> Personal comment from Muhammad Ali, Director of the Aleppo Museum, May 2002.

<sup>60</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 5.



urban conservation involving living cultures. The two major cities, Damascus and Aleppo, provide two quite different viewpoints. The emphasis on conservation in the old traditional centre in Damascus concentrates mainly on single buildings, and little is being done in urban conservation. It is the reverse in Aleppo; the focus is mainly on urban conservation programs that are beginning to be implemented, and although single buildings are being conserved, there are fewer examples than those in Damascus. Both the Damascus and Aleppo old centres have been entered on the World Heritage List.

Although the ancient city centres of both Damascus and Aleppo have ties reaching back to at least the fourth millennium BCE, their ancient fabric still reflects the passing centuries, and continues as vital economic and cultural urban cities in modern Syria. Both cities present contrasting methods of urban conservation. Maalula, a small village with cultural roots extending in an unbroken line to the pre-Christian period, is an example of a vernacular village, illustrating a long and continuous linguistic history coupled with a fascinating built heritage, but now succumbing to economic pressures through general modernisation as well as cultural tourism. In these examples the present culture forms the vital support and *raison d'être* of the built environment, both historic and new.

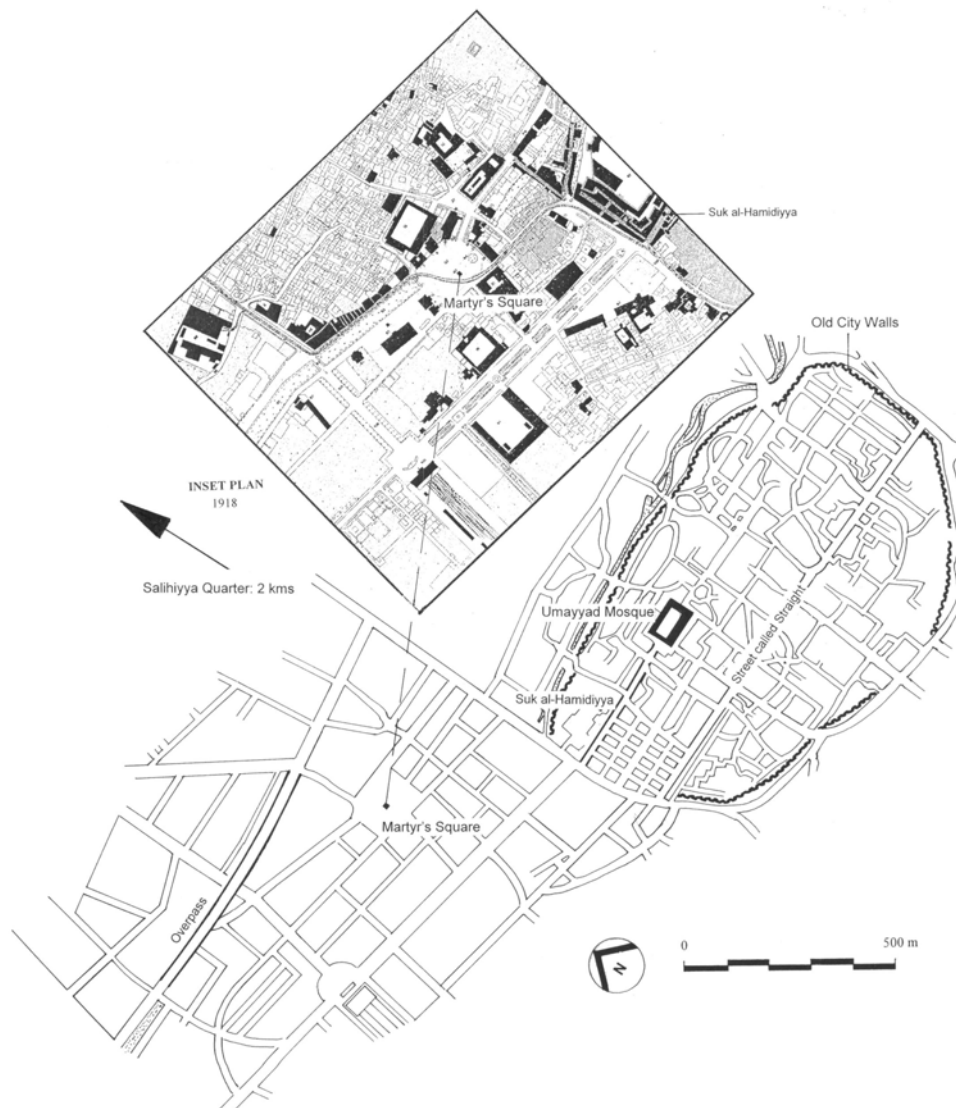
### **Damascus old city**

Damascus lays claim to being the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. The description for World Heritage listing states it was founded in the third millennium, BCE, and is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East. (Appendix 3). Situated on a large oasis, Burns claims the settlement has a history reaching back to the earliest phase of post-nomadic economic development to at least the fourth millennium BCE.<sup>61</sup> Its first historical reference occurs in the cuneiform tablets, first of Mari, and a little later, of Ebla. Much of the ancient city walls, still retaining both Roman and Arabic stonework remain, with their seven Roman gates, and two Arabic gates. The city was consolidated into a coherent town plan during the Hellenistic period, and it is remarkable that evidence of this basic plan still exists to the present day despite the many wars and civil upheavals the city

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<sup>61</sup> Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 1999), 75.

has suffered. Each layer of history has left its mark on the old city, and the expansion of modern Damascus outside the walls has ensured to some extent the integrity of the old city's fabric. (Fig. 17)



**Fig. 17.** Damascus: the old city within the walls, and some of the surrounding city with Martyr's Square. Redrawn from Afif Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, (Damascus: Government of Syria 1989). 108-9, and 115. **Inset:** Stefan Weber, *Abb. 57 Damaskus, Marğa-Platz (1918)* in "Damaskus: Zeugnisse einer Stadt im Wandel. Ein Survey zur spätosmanischen Baugeschichte (1808-1918)," in *Zehn Jahre Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Syrien, 1989-1998* (Damascus: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Damaskus, 1999), 94.

Settlements occurred outside the walls for several centuries, and some of these have now achieved historical significance in their own right. Although only two kilometres north of the old city, the Salihyya Quarter, was a self contained settlement, and contains major monuments dating back to the mediaeval period. In

more recent times, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, development took place causing the commercial centre of Damascus to be relocated outside the old city walls and to the west. Unchecked development has seen fundamental changes to this part of the city, which again has caused alarm to those members of the public who have a concern for the historic fabric located both within and without the city walls. The German Institute in Damascus has begun a series of surveys on the outer areas of the city, and record in its publication *Zehn Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Syrien, 1989-1998*, that Islam's history of wide reaching reforms during this period has resulted in "rash change" to the city's built heritage. Indeed, the Institute places special regard upon the architecture of this area as the physical manifestation that holds the key to the urban and societal upheaval occurring during these centuries.<sup>62</sup> The Institute concentrates mainly on these areas outside the old city, except for a short comment on the Suq al-Hamidiyya that forms the major entrance to the old city.

Whilst "rash change" can be markedly seen in these areas, the old city within its protective walls has retained a great proportion of its historic fabric. There are current attempts to restore the walls and older buildings within the city, a formidable task given the extent and condition of the historic fabric. The control of the conservation of monuments is the responsibility of several controlling bodies. Major monuments come under the control of the Department of Antiquities and the Syrian *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie* legislation. Included in its definition of "immovable antiquities" is "ancient towns."<sup>63</sup> Article 13 refers to "ancient town quarters," with respect to the Antiquities Authority having the right to determine which elements must be preserved. General conservation comes under the Damascus City Council, working through the Committee for the Preservation of Old Damascus. The bureaucratic system below this committee is cumbersome, consisting of a further three official committees: The Protection Committee, the Technical Committee, and the Inspection Committee. Their legislation is the Damascus Parliamentary Act No. 826 [*Damascus Act*] for the *Method of Restoration and Reconstruction/Rebuilding of the Old City within the*

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<sup>62</sup> Stefan Weber, "Damaskus: Zeugnisse einer Stadt im Wandel. Ein Survey zur spätoomanischen Baugeschichte (1808-1918)," in *Zehn Jahre Ausgrabungen und Forschungen in Syrien, 1989-1998* (Damascus: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Damaskus, 1999), 94 -95.

<sup>63</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 3-A.

*Walls*. (Appendix 4) This legislation is more detailed than that of the Syrian *Régime* and is specific to Damascus.

The *Damascus Act* begins with planning reference, which gives the basis for the planning decisions. It states that the 1926 – 1948 sets of survey maps were used for determining and planning the setbacks and heights of buildings in the old City.<sup>64</sup> Although not stated, it is implied that the intention is to restore and enhance the cadastral layout of the Old City as it was at that time. It is further stated that these drawings were done under the control of the French Authorities, as a record of the existing conditions at that time. This appears to give an official imprimatur to the drawings as authentic documents for conservation and further points to the distinction held by Syrians of the French at that time. The drawings are used as the basis for the amalgamation and ownership of property titles.<sup>65</sup>

Article 2.3 of the *Damascus Act* refers to building heights, and is concerned with maintaining the existing scale or returning where possible to the original heights, and hence reinstating the original scale. This echoes Articles 10 and 14 of the Syrian *Régime*, where new or restored constructions around historical monuments are required to maintain the original height or be in harmony with the historical character. The architectural and structural requirements generally seek to maintain original materials, massing and aesthetics, again to achieve harmony with the historical character. Article 2.6 of the *Damascus Act* sets out the bureaucratic requirements for approvals, and contains the only definitions in the Act. These are for “Simple Restoration,” “Restoration,” and “Rebuilding.”

The uses of buildings are detailed. The Syrian *Régime* requires that “listed historical monuments...are not to be used for any other purpose than that for which they were constructed.” Further to this, the “Antiquities Authorities have the right to authorise the use of these monuments for humane or cultural purposes.”<sup>66</sup> This is for listed historical monuments that are under the control of

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<sup>64</sup> Parliamentary Act No. 826 (Damascus), *Method of Restoration and Reconstruction/Rebuilding of the Old City within the Walls*. Syrian Conservation Policy, 27 August 1996. Article 2.1: Planning.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 2.2.

<sup>66</sup> *Régime Des Antiquités En Syrie*, Article 18.

the Antiquities Authority. The general buildings covered by the *Damascus Act* allows for slightly wider usage. Residential purposes are allowed as well as cultural, educational, health and tourist related purposes and for traditional crafts and commercial purposes and the like. These must have the permission of the Protection Committee. A list of examples is given in the Act some of which echo the Syrian *Régime*.<sup>67</sup> The examples illustrate conservative reuse that would have a low impact on the adaptation of the building fabric.

The *Damascus Act* is a simple document, but as such requires a heavy bureaucratic system to make it work. As with the Syrian *Régime*, everything must have approval from the relevant authority, and complaints have been made that approvals take an unreasonable time.<sup>68</sup> Further to the two-layered system of authorities—the Antiquities Authorities and the Committee for the Preservation of Old Damascus—a third authority exists for special projects. The President of Syria may choose monuments of national significance for conservation priority with special committees formed to oversee the projects. The conservation of the Umayyad Mosque is one such Presidential project, and operates through the Umayyad Mosque Restoration Committee. Concerned citizens have formed a Friends of Old Damascus society taking a “watchdog” role on these official controlling bodies, although it is unlikely that Presidential projects would receive openly stated criticism.

One project completed with some considerable impact to the Umayyad Mosque was the demolition of a block of buildings to form a square adjacent to the Mosque. Although not a strictly Presidential project, the demolition of houses and shops was done to facilitate “performances” with Guards-of-Honour for the President during his visits to the mosque.<sup>69</sup> The result is a very large and empty square, devoid of any character relating to the significance of the Mosque, mostly devoid of people, and now inviting an increasing number of cars and buses and hence becoming a car park by default. (Fig. 18) This is not only degrading the

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<sup>67</sup> *Method of Restoration and Reconstruction/Rebuilding of the Old City within the Walls*, Article 2.5.2

<sup>68</sup> Personal comments by architects and builders involved in conservation projects.

<sup>69</sup> Personal comments by architect Nazih Kawakibi and other members of the Friends of Old Damascus.

Mosque, but is quite alien to the culture of the people, as witnessed in this and other traditional cities. Traditional Arab-Islamic town centres contain small squares at strategic points for the purposes of daily living, and are characterised by intimacy and the busy interaction of people. The Mosque square is virtually empty, being used by the people only as a corridor, hot in summer and cold in winter. Although deplored by the Friends, little objection was made because of its connection with the President. Since 2001 a fountain has been constructed in an attempt to make the square more acceptable to the people (Fig. 19). Although presenting a clean and ordered finish to the square, the car parking continues, and the scale of the openness of the square still contrasts sharply to the compactness of the Arabic Old City urban structure.



**Fig. 18.** Damascus: the square adjacent to the Umayyad Mosque. (Author: 2001)

**Fig. 19.** Damascus: the Umayyad Mosque and square, with the fountain in the foreground. (Author: 2001)

One of the concerns of the Friends is the general lack of precinct conservation. Straight Street, more commonly known as the Street called Straight, is of significance to Islam and Christianity alike, and still roughly follows its line of New Testament days. It has been a marked feature since the original Hellenistic city layout. Today the street shows evidence of “planning” which took place during the time of the French League of Nations mandate earlier in the twentieth century. In places it was widened, and buildings of taller scale built back from the street line, some featuring concrete colonnades. Although evidence shows that the street has changed its form and width several times over its long history, it is this sort of planning that the Friends object to, and earnestly seek controls for an urban

conservation approach. Neither the *Damascus Act* nor the Syrian *Régime* provide suitable direction or control for such urban conservation. The approach of both Acts is centred on single buildings, and although it may be argued that in time an overall effect may be achieved by using this method, it is most unlikely that the sum of many attempts at single building conservation would ever add up to a cohesive whole. Where the character of a place is paramount, the only method to achieve unity is to pursue it through a comprehensive urban conservation approach.

Both within the old city and in the outlying Salihyya Quarter, the Friends, architects, builders, and the general public alike, are all critical of the way in which the conservation system is implemented.<sup>70</sup> Complaints cover a range of issues: that the Committee is concerned about “silly” details, but not even thinking of the major problems of infrastructure.<sup>71</sup> The Committee prefers and hence expects that the traditional courtyard houses will continue their use as houses, even though this function may not be viable, illustrating an example of enforcing an ideal without first tackling the socio/economic problems.<sup>72</sup> Another example is that in accordance with the current law the tenant is more powerful than the owner, as it is difficult to evict a tenant. In old houses containing tenants, conservation work is not even considered: the tenants do nothing and the owners do not have the incentive. The Committee enforces owners to do the “right thing,” but there are no incentives either in funding or other *quid pro quo* inducements.<sup>73</sup>

A recent “restoration” of the Suq al-Hamidiyya is one of the Presidential projects. The Suq had developed during the twentieth century by the shop owners surreptitiously extending their shop fronts further into the pedestrian street. Some had even erected new makeshift shop fronts in front of the original ones. The narrowing of the street added to the hustle, bustle and busyness of the Suq atmosphere. Although the Suq has existed for centuries, being located along a Roman axis, its present form of two-storeyed shops enclosed by a corrugated iron

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Personal comment by George Wazir, a builder doing restoration work on historic houses.

<sup>73</sup> Personal comment by Nazih Kawakibi.

arched roof dates only from the late nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> The presidential project required all owners to remove their encroachments, and now the Suq has been returned to its nineteenth-century form (Fig. 20). No compensation was given for this work, and the owners had to pay for the alterations themselves. The result is a much grander Suq visually, but the excitement has been reduced. The quality of the merchandise has increased, as more affluent shops such as clothing boutiques, aimed at the tourist industry, have replaced those of the lesser affluent owners.



**Fig. 20.** Damascus: the Suk al-Hamidiye restorations. The photo was taken on a Friday, and hence few people are present. (Author: 2000)

As a result of these sometimes-restrictive examples, a rather cavalier approach is being taken to conservation. A courtyard house was only given the approval for it to remain as a house, but the builder was adapting it as a combined house, restaurant, and jazz club. The jazz club was to be housed in the basement, so that its sound would be reduced and not easily identified. To achieve this change of use, the builder included a large newly tiled kitchen, and new male and female toilets. He had also re-tiled the courtyard in new tiles, without any consideration of the original pattern, a matter that could be of some concern to serious scholars

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<sup>74</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 89.



of Arabic design. He said that the Committee had been to inspect the building before this work had been done, and it was unlikely that they would return to inspect it again. His attitude was that the Committee insisted on only silly things, and refused permission often. He was critical of the situation, but played the system - that when being told “no! no! no!” by the Committee, you slipped them money, and “yes! yes! yes!” was the response.<sup>75</sup>

An example of confusing double standards was the criticism by one architect of work being done in the Salihyya Quarter. This was aimed at the use of terracotta blocks to replace a wall that had been built of stone. The wall was to have a plastered finish, so the question “what does it matter” was met with a strong rebuff of “they should be restoring the wall in its original manner.” The same architect, however, had no problem with restoring a collapsed stone wall of a mosque with a concrete wall. He also intended to use “epoxy” timber beams available from Europe, in the shape and texture of the original timber, so nobody would be able to tell the difference. An added advantage was that the epoxy was impervious to insect attack. But he was very critical of another conservation site. The architect/builder was in the process of restoring the structural timbers of the original tiled roof. He was replacing old beams that had been eaten by termites with new beams of matching timber, and placing them alongside the original beams. He was leaving the original beams in place, so that future conservators would know the new beams from the old. This, however, was not acceptable to the architect who would use epoxy beams. However, further inspection of the works on this building, a most ornate house with remarkable and intricate decoration, showed cupboard doors of complex painted designs, capable of being conserved, but were to be repainted or replaced with new doors in matching designs and colours. Upon questioning the replacement of the doors, the pragmatic response was that it was better to replace the old doors. It was impossible to reconcile the opposing philosophical differences between keeping the old timber beams where they could not be seen, and unnecessarily replacing

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<sup>75</sup> Personal comment of the architect/builder, who wishes to remain anonymous.

the original doors with copies that could be seen. It can only be assumed that aesthetics was the main (but unstated) reason.<sup>76</sup>

These examples indicate the current complex situation of confusing double standards regarding conservation philosophy. The architect/builder cited in this last example claimed to have worked in France and Italy on conservation projects, but had not heard of the Venice Charter.

### **The old city of Aleppo**

In the manner of claiming superlative heritage merit, the Old City of Aleppo, together with Damascus, asserts to be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.<sup>77</sup> (Figs. 21 and 22.) The World Heritage citation places it in the second millennium BCE, (Appendix 5). A considerable amount of the historic fabric of the past few centuries still remains, even though it has suffered more intrusive development than Damascus. Only portions of the old walls exist, and so the definition of the old city is not immediately apparent. The notable feature of Aleppo is the central Citadel. Its commanding position has assured its central role as a fortification within the city walls. Excavations have revealed evidence of occupation since the tenth century BCE (contemporary with the Ain Dara temple), and since that time has had a history of continuous destruction and reconstruction. The current citadel is thought to extend back to at least before the Seleucid period (third century BCE).



**Fig. 21.** Aleppo: an aerial view showing the Citadel and the close-knit fabric of the old city. Postcard from Aleppo, no date.

<sup>76</sup> The architect/builder requested that no photographs be taken.

<sup>77</sup> Kamal Bitar, Adli Qudsi, and Jens Windelberg (eds.), *Old City of Aleppo: A Changing process Influenced* (Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 1997), 1.

**Fig. 22.** Aleppo: plan from Kamal Bitar, Adli Qudsi, and Jens Windelberg, *Old City of Aleppo: A Changing Process Influenced* (Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). 1997), 17.

Aleppo's economic and political fortunes have wavered over the centuries. It reached an architectural highpoint during the Ayyubid period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, evidence of which in the form of the Citadel, mosques and *madrassas*, still remains.<sup>78</sup> It reached its commercial peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and at this time was the third largest city in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>79</sup> During the eighteenth century the city fell into both a political and commercial decline, and by the nineteenth century, together with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, it fell into obscurity.<sup>80</sup> These factors have helped to ensure its better preservation than that of Damascus. In addition, as Burns states:

its very lack of a modern economic boom has encouraged Aleppo in its old habits of turning in on itself, to preserve its traditional methods of operation and its architecture. Untouched on the whole by the contemporary tourism surge, the rediscovery of Aleppo may come in an age when its past will be more sympathetically preserved. Meanwhile Aleppo remains one of the treasures of the Middle East that should be savoured carefully lest its dignity and fragility be lost.<sup>81</sup>

From the end of the nineteenth century, the old city began to lose its economic functions as new extramural growth began spreading. In 1909, when the now famous Baron Hotel was built, it lay on the outskirts of the city in a garden setting. Today, the hotel lies in the centre of a massive sprawling city. The social migration from the old city to the outer areas has resulted in a social decline matched by an economic decline within the old city. However, the mid-twentieth century saw an awakening to the heritage factors of the old city, and a number of planning schemes were produced, either to enliven its commercial potential, or to maintain its historic significance.

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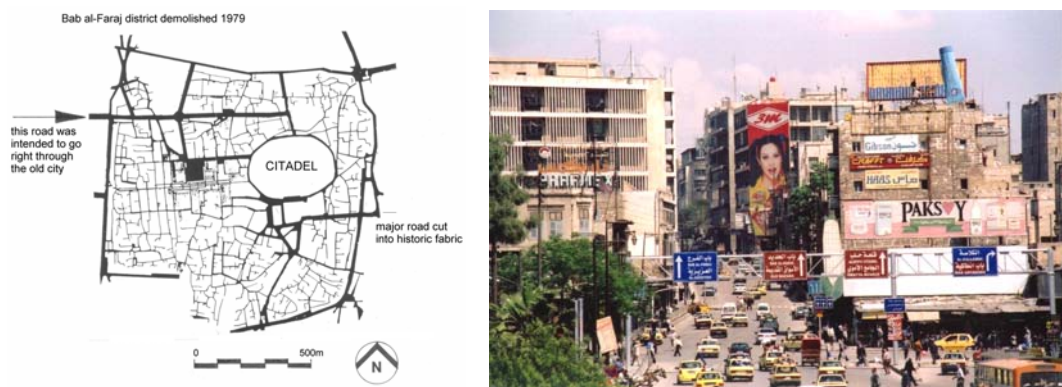
<sup>78</sup> Qudsi, "Aleppo: A Struggle for Conservation" *Mimar* 12 (Singapore: Concept Media, 1984), 21.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 29.

Danger and Ecochard produced one of the first town planning schemes under the French administration in the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> This was followed by a second French scheme under André Gutton in 1954. The Japanese planner Gyoji Banshoya produced a further scheme in 1974, and it was at this time that most of the destruction and inappropriate infill development that remains today took place (Fig. 23 and 24). It was the Banshoya scheme and the destruction of 42 hectares of significant historic fabric that alerted concerned citizens of Aleppo, who in protest, succeeded in stemming the development. However, even with the support of UNESCO, the implementation of a proper conservation plan was not addressed. The northwest corner of the old city, the Bab al-Faraj area, suffered considerable demolition during 1979.<sup>83</sup> It was not until 1983 that a stop was placed on the progress of the plans, and a new plan sought.



**Fig. 23.** Aleppo: plan showing the major roads cut into the old city under the Banshoya scheme, and the demolition of most of the old fabric in the Bab al-Faraj district that alarmed the local population. Stefano Bianca, “Designing Compatibility between New Projects and the Local Urban Tradition” in Margaret Bentley Ševčenko (ed), *Continuity and Change*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1984). 23.

**Fig. 24.** Aleppo: one of the entrances of the Banshoya scheme into the old city, as shown in Fig. 23. (Author: 2001)

The time for sympathetic preservation is now nigh, as a massive “Project for the Rehabilitation of the Old City of Aleppo” is beginning.<sup>84</sup> This plan was produced in 1997, and in the intervening years new development has taken place, albeit slowly, but without the control of an overall plan. The objectives of the Project are to stop the process of deterioration and social decline through the improvement of

<sup>82</sup> Qudsi, “Aleppo: A Struggle for Conservation,” 21.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>84</sup> The title given in the document: kamal Bitar, Adli Qudsi, and Jens Windelberg (eds.), *Old City of Aleppo – a Changing Process Influenced* (Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 1997).

the infrastructure and public services, and the restoration of residential houses and significant monuments.<sup>85</sup> It is a joint venture of the Syrian and German governments, with funding to be shared equally by both governments. The scope of the project goes beyond the confines of the old walled city, and includes the immediate surrounding areas which, although of comparatively more recent development has now assumed a historical significance of its own, while maintaining the historical character of the old city (Fig. 21).

The Project is a massive undertaking and is still in its very early stages. Little has been done in actual building, but the earlier public report and the comprehensive conservation guidelines indicate the direction the Project intends to follow. The approach is centred on urban conservation rather than the single building approach of Damascus. Conservation work is being done to single buildings in Aleppo, but it does not appear to be as sporadic as Damascus. This indicates a more organised process where each project will take its place in the overall scheme.

The Project is under the control of the Municipality of Aleppo. This operates through two committees, the High Committee for the Preservation of Aleppo, which overlooks the whole Project, and the Technical Committee that is responsible for reviewing all building activities in the old city. The Technical Committee oversees major monuments, but conservation work to these monuments must be referred to the Antiquities Department of Syria for approval.

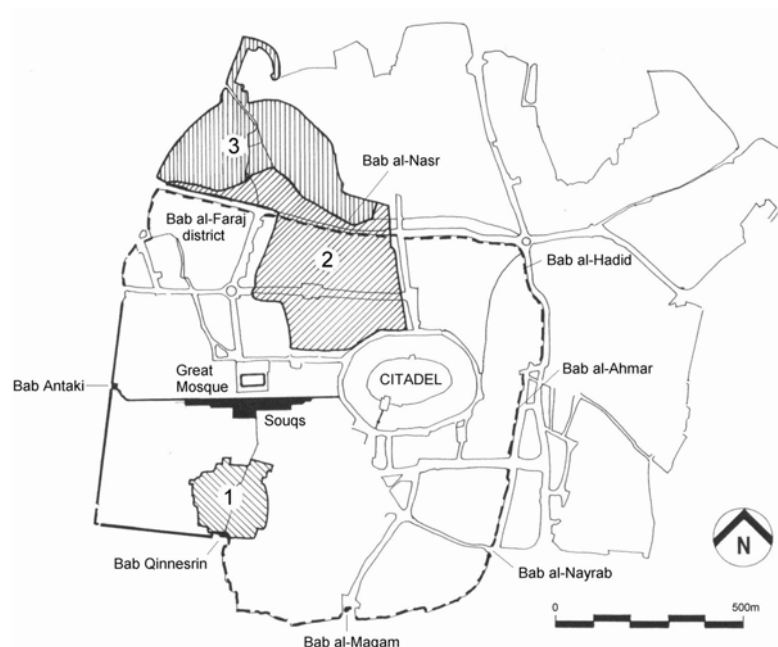
The operating document is the *Guidelines for the Restoration and Renovation of the old City of Aleppo*, produced through a joint Syrian-German enterprise, and published by the GTZ - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for Technical Cooperation). The *Guidelines* show the Western influence from both the German expertise, and an involved Syrian senior architect who has spent some years in America doing both planning and conservation

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<sup>85</sup> Jens Windelberg (ed.), *Guidelines for the Restoration and Renovation of the old City of Aleppo*. (Eschborn: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), 2000), Article 1.3. Spelling errors throughout this document have been corrected in the references without further acknowledgement.

studies and work. In addition, the *Venice Charter* is quoted as a basis for restoration standards.<sup>86</sup>

Emphasis is given to public participation, and the Project has been widely advertised through a colourful brochure setting out the objectives, phases, and principles with diagrams and photographs. What is called in the brochure “the project’s *leitmotif*,” indicating German terminology, aims to preserve the valuable and unique fabric of the old city, slow down the deterioration of its residential zones, and improve housing and living conditions.<sup>87</sup> For this it is necessary to gain the co-operation of the local people, as part of the strategy is that the owners will largely fund the rehabilitation of private residences. To attract this private investment, financial support in the form of loans and grants through a newly established Emergency Fund and Rehabilitation Fund is to be provided.<sup>88</sup> The source of this funding is not clear, and little further information has been given on this aspect through the official documentation. Although the goal of the Project is admirable, it will probably be the funding, or lack of it, that will determine its level of success.



**Fig. 25.** Aleppo: plan showing Action Areas 1, 2 and 3. Copied in part from Bitar et al. (eds.), *Old City of Aleppo: A Changing process Influenced*, 18.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Article 1.2.

<sup>87</sup> Bitar et al (eds.), *Old City of Aleppo: A Changing process Influenced*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> Personal comment Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, a senior architect for the project.

The Project has been broken down into 19 Action Areas, with three areas (Fig. 25) beginning to be implemented on the principle of “learning by example.”<sup>89</sup> Action Area-1, the Bab Qinnisrin area, has been chosen as a test area for the “various tools of rehabilitation;” Action Area-2, a test field for economic and social improvement in general; and Action Area-3, to analyse the potential of tourism as a contributor to the rehabilitation efforts.<sup>90</sup> The total project covers 400 hectares, and is estimated to cost approximately 2 million US Dollars per hectare.<sup>91</sup> The Municipality of Aleppo has begun by giving 1 million DM towards the Project, in the expectation of seeding a rolling fund, and that subsequent phases will be funded from the proceeds of the previous phase. The current atmosphere is one of enthusiasm and confidence, and it is to be sincerely hoped that the project will be successful in attaining its stated goals.



**Fig. 26.** Aleppo: the Great Mosque and the minaret. Postcard from Aleppo, no date.

Another project being carried out, but not under the auspices of the rehabilitation Project, is the conservation of the Great Mosque, sometimes referred to as Zakariyya Mosque, or more commonly as the Umayyad Mosque. (Fig. 26) This latter name is not strictly correct, as the only portion of the Umayyad period is the plan. A greater portion of the fabric dates from the mid-twelfth century, with

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Personal comments by Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj.

numerous alterations and additions since that time. The magnificent minaret, in the form of a 45-meter high tower, is “one of the first examples of a growing sense of assured style in Syrian Islamic architecture.”<sup>92</sup> Both the minaret and the main building are the subject of conservation due to some cracks recently becoming dangerously obvious. This is another of the President’s projects, and therefore the responsibility of a special committee answerable to the Antiquities Authorities.

The Syrian architect of the rehabilitation Project is critical of the work being done to the mosque, as it has proceeded without any monitoring phase. He is concerned about the excessive use of concrete in the footings, which may pose not only a structural threat to the fabric, but also to its “authenticity.” This was the first time that a Syrian architect had referred to “authenticity,” as the word does not have an equivalent word in Arabic. When questioned, he referred to the word *asala*, meaning “originality.” The word “authenticity” does not appear in the *Aleppo Guidelines*, although they are drafted to retain as much of the original material as possible, at least reflecting the aims of an authentic approach.

Some examples of this are the references in the *Aleppo Guidelines* to the permitted scope of construction and the “exchange of original substance.” Many further examples appear in the major body of the *Guidelines*, for example, under General Principles “the sensitive repair of the original construction has absolute priority.” Again, “original building elements have to be repaired even if the costs are higher than new elements.” And yet again, “original materials should be reused.” It is of particular note that “repair has to be executed in the traditional workmanship.”<sup>93</sup>

Whilst not denigrating the necessity and intentions of the project in Aleppo, there still remains a doubt as to the general approach and substance of the *Guidelines*, that they truly reflect the desires of the people of Aleppo in its aims and methods. That Aleppo is in need of conservation there is no doubt, and the approach should

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<sup>92</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 35.

<sup>93</sup> Windelberg (ed.), *Guidelines for the Restoration and Renovation of the old City of Aleppo*, Article 3.2.



achieve in the long run a far more satisfactory result than that of Damascus. Public participation is essential, but the real test of the implementation will still rest with the authorities, of which, through the various committees, there appears to be abundance. In the manner of Middle Eastern practice, each participant will require a just remuneration. Whilst the hospitality of the Syrian population can be overwhelming, in strict business practices the participants drive very hard bargains. In a project such as this in Aleppo, hospitality will not form part of the equation, and because of the authoritarian controls, hard bargains indeed will be driven, or alternative methods resorted to. Given this traditional business approach, and the concern of whether enough funds will be made available to complete the stated aims, questions remain: should these issues not be resolved, what will be the fate of the incomplete Project, and would such a result be better if its implementation had not been attempted on such a massive scale?

### **Maalula**

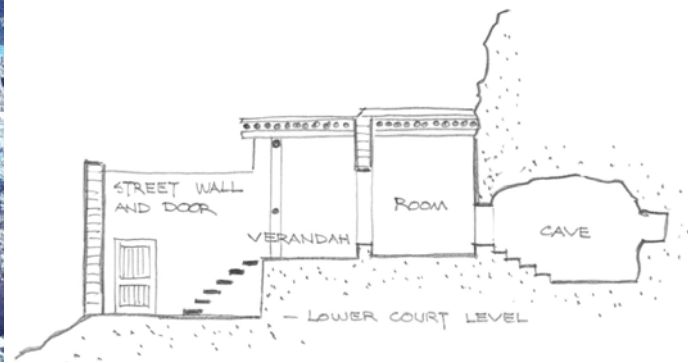
The experiences of Maalula are on a totally different plane than those in Damascus or Aleppo. It is a small village 60 km north of Damascus. Its significance lies in its cultural roots reaching back to pre-Christian times that are manifest in the inhabitants who still speak Aramaic, a common language of Biblical times. They remain one of the very few groups that have continued with this language although a few communities in the north-east of Syria also speak a form of neo-Aramaic, descendant from Persia or Iraq. This use of the old language illustrates the resoluteness of the inhabitants of Maalula to their early Aramaean/Christian culture in the face of an overwhelming Arab-Islamic culture and language. References are made to this linguistic phenomenon in both tourist and specialist books.<sup>94</sup> Burns links the language of the people to their identity when he states “even the vestigial survival of West Aramaic (Syriac) as a spoken tongue indicates the tenacity with which the inhabitants of Maalula have clung to their identity.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> For example, Afif Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, 130. Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 152. Ghiyas Aljundi, “Eastern Mediterranean and Levant” in *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, vol. 2, 1510. Aljundi makes a passing reference, as his main topic is the vernacular architecture style and construction.

<sup>95</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 152.

Regarding the built heritage, the houses reflect this long cultural link with the past. Reaching back as far as the language, they illustrate the community's troglodytic beginnings by forming their houses in caves in the steep limestone cliffs. The development of these dwellings over the centuries has taken the form of flat facades being constructed on the front of the caves, and as time has moved on, further extensions being built to the front of these facades. Today, many of these dwellings remain, still retaining their early cave rooms deep in the confines of the houses. Owners of these houses are proud of their built heritage, together with the climatic comforts that this form of construction offers. (Figs. 27 and 28).



**Fig. 27.** Maalula: traditional houses. (Author: 1966)

**Fig. 28.** Maalula: sketch section through a house. (Author: 1999)

The entry for the Eastern Mediterranean sector listed in the *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* places Maalula in the Kalamoun area of Syria.<sup>96</sup> A long description is given of the construction methods for this region. Maalula is referred to as “renowned for the charm of its picturesque architecture, and incidentally, where the language of Christ, Syriac, is still spoken.”<sup>97</sup> The village is included because of the similarity of the construction of the later portions of the houses, but their cave beginnings and their continued use are not mentioned. Reference is made to the diversity of the built heritage, which, it is

<sup>96</sup> Paul Oliver (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>97</sup> Ghiyas Aljundi, “Eastern Mediterranean and Levant” in *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, vol. 2, 1510.

stated, “the dwellings reflect in their appearance the physical, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions of this region well-known for its diverse methods of construction.”<sup>98</sup> Only the general construction methods of the region are detailed, but apart from the passing mention of the language, the socioeconomic and cultural conditions fail to be mentioned. This is a serious omission, as it is these factors that could give vital clues to the understanding of the Maalula houses and the culture.

This house form is in strong contrast to the equally significant but totally different house forms of the Idlib and Hauran regions, only several hundred kilometers north and south of Maalula. (Fig. 29) A comparison of the Maalula houses, with the Idlib beehive houses, and the houses of corbelled construction in the Hauran (Bosra) district, also reaching back into antiquity, indicate the diverse cultural differences existing in Syria. The recognition of the significance of each of the regions is essential to gain a fuller picture of the rich diversity that exists in this small country. However, recent developments in Maalula are indicating the influence of the West, with new five storey residential buildings, fully air-conditioned, being constructed on the flat plain. Generally, the younger generation is scorning the old buildings as old fashioned, and preferring the new.<sup>99</sup>



**Fig. 29.** Idlib: the typical beehive houses of this region. cf. the Maalula and Idlib constructions with the drawing of the house construction in the Hauran region, Fig. 37. (Author: 1999)

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 1509.

<sup>99</sup> This information and the sketch section are the result of a visit of the author and discussions with the local people.

Burns states “though rich in historical associations, Maalula preserves only a few remains of its past.”<sup>100</sup> This statement alone illustrates the focus of perceived tourist expectations. He refers to the houses as “a village of some charm, its tempered houses piled upon the lower slopes of an escarpment rising sheer above the village.”<sup>101</sup> His short description then concentrates solely on the chapels of unknown antiquity set in the base of the escarpment. The old Greek Orthodox Monastery of *Mar Taqla* (St Thecla) and several churches and chapels, all illustrating the strong Christian commitment of the community, have gained the attention of the tourist industry, and the houses are slipping into oblivion. Not denigrating the significance of these religious complexes, it is the houses as well as the religious complexes of Maalula that so strongly form the links of a long cultural history. It may be that the non-recognition of the houses and the tourist emphasis on the churches has contributed to the Aramaic language declining in the face of a more determined Arabic cultural thrust. Yet the language and the houses remain equally a most significant aspect of Maalula, if only the tourist and archaeological groups would recognise it.

The increasing tourist industry has been responsible for the construction of a four star hotel in a most conspicuous position, along the top of the cliff face. It is an intrusion into what had been a quiet and close-knit village. (Figs. 30 and 31) This is a tacit indictment of the ignorance of the culturally significant fabric of this village.



**Fig. 30.** Maalula: the village in 1966. (Author: 1966)



**Fig. 31.** Maalula: the village in 1999 with the new hotel. (Author: 1999)

<sup>100</sup> Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, 152.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 152.

Bahnassi, although an archaeologist but writing for the tourist industry, refers to the hotel in positive terms. He does not overlook its imposing nature when he writes “A luxury hotel dominates the village and it would be good to have a stop there, not only for the hospitality, but also for the beauty of the scenery.”<sup>102</sup>

It was specifically stated that conservation in Maalula would be under the control of the requirements of the Syrian *Régime*, as no other document has been prepared for development or conservation controls.<sup>103</sup> It is obvious that little, if any, control has been exercised, probably due again to the several religious buildings being seen as the only significant places. For the sake of the built heritage and the linguistic heritage, the significance of the village should be made aware to the new inhabitants, who could then join the descendants of the original inhabitants in maintaining this unique heritage.

### **1.5 Summary**

It is a stated belief that archaeological sites and historic buildings and urban centres have the ability to reveal and strengthen cultural identity. This can only be achieved if their conservation retains those elements that reflect social and cultural factors. The experiences in Syria reveal a number of anomalies, which raise questions regarding social and cultural issues in relation to conservation techniques, interpretation and presentation. The early examples of Mari, Ebla and Dura Europos show the problems occurring before the present day understanding of conservation philosophy and techniques, and the attempts to correct these. Ain Dara is an example of one such attempt that failed. Bosra illustrates a lost opportunity to realise a unique cultural experience, analogous to Maalula in concentrating on the obvious tourist potential but ignoring its significant cultural attributes of the extraordinary village houses.

This raises the question of authenticity and its associated ethical problems. This can be appreciated through a number of issues: misrepresentation for perceived

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<sup>102</sup> Afif Bahnassi, *Guide to Syria*, 130.

<sup>103</sup> Personal comment from Sultan Muheysen, Director of Antiquities of the National Museum, Damascus, 1999.

tourism purposes, misrepresentation of detailed physical fabric, such as plastic “timber” beams, and the corruption of the authorities, as experienced in both Damascus and Aleppo. This latter problem could easily be dismissed as typical Eastern practice, but in conservation it can mean irrevocable damage to valuable heritage property. The complexity of this issue is that the participants generally have sympathy and commitment to conservation and this behaviour is seemingly incongruous to Western eyes. This in turn questions the input of Western expertise and assistance, and their approach as guided by the various charters and guidelines.

This leads us first to a critical examination of the conservation charters in use throughout the world, and their relevance to Eastern practice, and secondly the concept of authenticity as implied in those charters, and its validity as a conservation ideal.