

# Damascus: Layers of Civilisations

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## **Abstract**

Damascus is not only the capital city of Syria but a pivotal point of connection that lies in the heart of the Middle East. This essay offers a mythical reading of the complex religious and architectural changes layered in the middle of the old city and maps the changes sites underwent through the centuries. The title of this study - Layers of Civilisation - is a term that aims to illustrate the long and intricate history related to the site on which the Umayyad Mosque sits. The continuity of the Mosque/Church/Temple complex, particularly that of the temenos, stresses the fact that this city has always been a sacred and religious ground for the people inhabiting it. The readings in this essay, therefore, empower the reader to indulge in understanding the meaning of these myths and their influence on the history and civilisation of the city. The fact that the vast array of legends and sacred stories woven around each corner of the city stresses its sacredness and its naming as the image of Paradise on earth. That is illustrated through the exploration of the long-lasting seven gates that still surround the old city as well as the mythical and historical accounts connected to each of them. It is impossible to find a unified version of any mythical story. Each nation occupied the city contributed to it. Indeed, myths woven around parts of the city open vast realms of imagination related to the continuity and prosperity of Damacus.

Keywords: Myth Reading, Damascus, Seven Gates, Umayyad Mosque.

## Introduction

This essay is written in a descriptive manner allowing an exploration of the ancient myths related to the heroic and religious history of Damascus. It presents a reading of these myths at different points of the city's history rather than critically analysing them. Nonetheless, it empowers and guides the reader to experience the meaning of the inherited stories and allows an indulgence in the 'experience of the meaning'. In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell stresses the importance of myths reading as follows: "Read myths. They teach you that you can turn inward, and you begin to get the message of the symbols... Myth helps you to put your mind in touch with this experience of being alive. It tells you what the experience is" (Moyers 2011, p. 5). Therefore, it can be argued that the experience of understanding the meaning behind the mythical stories is one of the main characteristics that defines myths.

The stories mentioned here might not be true or might seem unreal to the reader. However, this is the main reason that ascribes them as mythical. This paper explores the myths of the creation of the city and some of its most prominent historical and religious sites like the Ummayyad Mosque and its famous seven gates. It also addresses the reasoning and the mythical explanations behind the naming of the gates, as well as the main historical incidents that took place in relation to some of these gates. This paper provides the reader with an overview of the myths that evolved and are still evolving around the old city, the seven gates, and the Ummayyad Mosque leading to articulate an overall picture of the accumulating mythical inheritance of this majestic city.

## Damascus

Before starting to examine the myths behind the historical structures, it is essential to understand the nature of the city and its long history. Dimashq al-sham, also known as the City of Jasmine, is one of the most ancient, inhabited capitals in the world, and there are many interpretations of the origin of its name. The Latin or Greek word "Damascus" is believed to come from "Damakina", the wife of the god of water, and consequently Damascus means "a well-watered place". In the introduction of his book *Damascus: A History*, Burns (2005, p.xix) suggests the connection of the city's name with the sun "Mash' (incidentally the name of one of the sons of Aram in Genesis 10.23) is possibly a reference to the sun". In this case, the current Arabic popular name of the city, 'al-shams' which means 'the sun' could refer to the city as the city of the sun. The

first mention of the city appears in Egypt on a wall of the Karnak Temple in an inscription of Thutmose III (1468 BC). However, there is evidence of earlier settlement in the Barada oasis going back to 9000 BC.

On the map of the world, Damascus stands in a central point that connects three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. It also forms a juncture for trade, especially silk trade. According to DeGeorge (2005, p.7), “its place on the great incense and silk trade routes linking India and the Mediterranean by way of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea ....”. Damascus is located in south west of Syria and lies between the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on one side and the Syrian Desert that extends for thousands of miles all the way to the Indian Ocean on the other. It is destined to be a shelter and stop for the desert-traveller who sees its orchards as a mirage in the middle of the desert. Ancient people started to inhabit this area because of the river of Barada which seeped into the plain creating the Ghuta oasis. In his visit to Damascus in 1867, Mark Twain indicated that Damascus will not die as long as its waters remain. In his book *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain (2018, p.366) states: “Damascus is simply an oasis—that is what it is. For four thousand years its waters have not gone dry, or its fertility failed. ... so long will Damascus live to bless the sight of the tired and thirsty wayfarer”.

The land of prophets, one of Damascus’ various names, proposes several legends woven around prophets who founded and others who lived in this sacred land. One legend holds that “it was founded by Uz, great-grandson of Noah. Another says it was begun by Demschak, a slave of Abraham” (Morrison 2003, p. 31). In seeking the ancient origin of the city, the Book of Genesis of the Old Testament mentions that “as long ago as the first century AD the Jewish historian Josephus attributed the founding of Damascus to Uz, one of the sons of Aram, son of Shem, son of Noah” (Burns 2005, p. xix). In Mount Qasioun, there is Adam’s cave where the father of mankind lived. Moreover, in Berza’s area, there is another cave where Cain killed his brother Abel, “and to which Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Lot, and Job retreated to pray” (DeGeorge 2005, p. 12) The city is known for its wide history and numerous legends, and the myth of its birth can be traced back to the beginning of the universe.

## The Seven Gates

Surrounded by its walls, the old city has an approximate area of one hundred and twenty-eight hectares. It has a citadel and seven Roman gates, and the outline of the city has an oval shape. The citadel was built between 1077 and 1157 by the Seljuks. Unlike other citadels which were built on hills or prominent and high places, Damascus Citadel was built on a flat site. It has the shape of a square, but the north side of the citadel is irregular because of Barada River. The main purpose of the building of the citadel was to control the river's water (Darke 2006, p. 82). Many of the materials used in building the citadel were recycled and reused from the ancient columns of the city.

The seven Roman gates of the old city are as follows; Bab al-Saghir (The Small Gate) was dedicated to Mars according to the Romans. It was named so because it is the smallest of seven gates, and it is located northeast of the city. Yazid Bin Abu Sufiyan, the general sent by Caliph Abu Bakr to invade the Roman Syria, entered Damascus from this gate in his conquest of the city 634 A.D. Tamurlane also entered the city from the same gate in 1400 A.D. The second gate is Bab al-Faradis (The Gate of the Orchards, or The Gate of the Paradise). The Roman dedication of the gate was to Mercury. The reason behind the naming is the fact that in the Roman era the gate was surrounded by many orchards and water places (Shihabi 1996, p.182).

The third gate is Bab al-Salam (The Gate of Peace) which the Romans dedicated to the Moon. It is on the north boundary of the Old City. It is next to Thomas Gate, and it was rebuilt in the time of Nour al Din Mahmud where he built a minaret over it. It was called the Gate of Peace because it was barred at the time of the Islamic conquest for the city. The fourth gate is Bab Tuma (Touma or Thomas's Gate) which lies in the north-east corner of the city, leads into the Christian quarter of the same name. In his book *Gates of Damascus & Their Historical Events*, Shihabi (1996) suggests the possibility of naming the gate after Aphrodite in the Greek dynasty and Venus in the Roman. However, when Christianity became the principal religion of the city, it was renamed "Thomas Gate" after Saint Thomas the Apostle.

The fifth gate is Bab Sharqi (Eastern Gate) which lies in the east wall. While all other gates were destroyed at different points of history and got rebuilt, Bab Sharqi is the only gate that retained its Roman shape. This gate is formed of three vents in the form of arches. The biggest vent is the one in the middle and behind it there's a straight street, while behind the other two vents there are small hallways located on the two sides of the street and carried by columns. The gate was named

according to the location of the gate in the east of the city, and it refers to Sun in the Roman era. The Islamic warrior Khaled Bin Al Waleed entered the city through this gate.

Bab Kisan, the sixth gate, lies in the south-east part of the city. It was dedicated to Saturn in the Roman era. It is believed that from this gate Saint Paul made his escape from Damascus, lowered from a window in the walls in a basket; this gate is now closed and has become an entrance to a Church of the same name which was built in the Byzantine era. The name is related to Kissan the guardian of the Umayyad Caliph Mo'awia. The seventh and final gate is Bab al-Jabiya which means in Arabic Water Trough. It lies in the west side of the city. In the Roman era, this gate was dedicated to Jupiter. It faces the eastern gate, and it also has the same structure. The name is ascribed to Al Jabieh village, as Damascenes used this gate when going to that village.

### **The Umayyad Mosque**

In the middle of the old city lies the magnificent Umayyad Mosque. The site of the present Umayyad Mosque has always been used for religious purposes and included sacred areas. The temple of Ramman-Hadad at the Semitic period occupied the same place, and in the Roman era Hadad was equal to the Roman god Jupiter and the temple was lavishly developed. After the embracing of Christianity, the temple was converted to a Christian Church dedicated to John the Baptist. After the capturing of Damascus by the Arabs and the settlement of more Muslims in the city, Caliph al-Walid felt the need for an assembly area that accommodates the whole population. The best place that is located in the middle of the city and can accommodate the increasing number of Muslims at that time was the compound of the temple which was occupied by the church. He discussed the matter with the Christians, compensated with them and converted the whole compound of the temple to the splendid Umayyad Mosque.

Under the Aramaean dynasty, the temple was dedicated to the Semitic storm god, Hadad. However, under the Greek Empire, Antiochus IV planning to make Zeus the central deity in the pantheon, assimilated Zeus to Hadad. "Zeus is also depicted on contemporary coins in Semitic guise holding thunderbolts in his hands and standing between two bulls" (Burns 2005, p. 40). In the Greco-Roman period, the temple had intense care from Septimius Severus, the husband of the Syrian Princess Julia Domna, who put the temple's image for the first time on the reverse of his coins.

The structure of Jupiter Temple consisted of a huge enclosure ‘peribolos’ which surrounded the sanctuary or the temenos. The temenos included the sacred chamber of the temple, the cella. The remains of the western ‘propylaeum’ or gate of the temple can be still seen in front of “Bab al-Barid”, the entrance to the Umayyad Mosque. In his book *The Monuments of Syria: A Guide*, Burns (1992, p.77) describes the structure of the temple: “In accordance with Syro-phoenician tradition, the temple compound consisted of a huge enclosure with a central chamber and sacrificial altar. The compound was much bigger than the present mosque, the inner enclosure (*temenos*) being surrounded by an outer *peribolos*, traces of which can still be observed in the surrounding streets of the old city”.

Jupiter Heliopolitanus<sup>1</sup> was depicted by local people as beardless youth holding in his right hand a whip and in his left, thunderbolts and ears of grain together (Hitti 1951, 312). He was portrayed wearing a uniform with the seven deities over whom he dominated. People beseeched his help and made many pilgrimages and sacrifices in his altar. They believed that when he is in good humour he sends rain to bless the crops, but when in ill humour he sends floods to destroy crops and folks.

Pilgrims’ visits to the site of Jupiter’s temple had combined religious and commercial interests for the people of the city. Hadad-Ramman, Jupiter, and then Zeus Temple drew immense crowds to its festivals. People gathered to the regular festivals which had the features of a market, “a country fair and a religious feast” (Hitti 1951, p. 66). The pilgrims used to wait in the peribolos to be allowed to the inner part of the temple.

When the crowds of the pilgrims entered the inner temenos, they had to behave in a certain way which accorded with the holiness of the temple. Ordinary visitors fulfilled their religious obligations at the outdoor altars, as they were not allowed to the inner sanctum, the cella. They could witness the sacrifices performed by the priests of the temple on the high tower. The use of towers for presenting the sacrifice was a ritual that had a long tradition. Since primitive ages, Semitic people performed their sacrifices on high places like towers and terraces. The main purpose of this ritual was to make the sacrifice as close as possible to the sky to be accepted by God.

The central ritual which only the priests were allowed to perform consisted probably of a ritual meal, part of the food being offered to the god. On certain feasts, ritual procession with the

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<sup>1</sup> His full title was Jupiter Optimus Maximus Heliopolitanus.

images of the god passed through the eastern processional way to the temple. Moreover, the priests involved in the holy procession performed a number of special rituals before and after the main service. “On certain annual festivals this statue [statue of Jupiter] was borne on the shoulders of prominent Heliopolitans who prepared themselves for the solemnities by shaving the head and vowing abstinence and chastity” (Hitti 1951, p. 312). The Aramean Hadad temple was of great importance to the people, and it was mentioned twice in the Bible. The story talks about the conquering king of Judah, Ahaz. He found the Great Temple in Damascus so impressive, that he ordered his priests to make a copy of it in Jerusalem. “When King Ahaz [r.732-716 BC] went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pilaser King of Assyria, he saw the altar which was in Damascus. King Ahaz then sent a picture and model of the altar, with details of its construction, to Uriah the Priest. Uriah the Priest constructed the altar” (Burns 2005, p.20).

This legend proves that there is no doubt that the temple was the main point of attraction in the city. After the adoption of Christianity, however, a church was built on the site of the temple, and it was devoted to Saint John the Baptist. The church’s foundation was attributed to the Emperor Theodosius in 391, and it is said that it was built in a part of the temenos of Jupiter’s temple. Currently, in the prayer hall of the Umayyad Mosque, visitors can see the green tomb of John the Baptist. According to Darke (2006, p.81), “within the huge internal space the first thing to notice is the green-glassed domed building freestanding at the eastern end as you enter”. During the Mosque’s construction process, a legend says that the workmen found a cave and asked for the Calipha to come and see what was inside. When the Calipha Al- Walid entered he saw “a beautiful chapel ... and within lay a chest, inside of which was a basket, on which was written: “This is the Head of John, the son of Zacharias” (Keenan 2000, p.27). Hence, the Calipha ordered to build a shrine for John the Baptist in the prayer hall.

Since the Umayyad Mosque is the last structure to be built on top of all these ancient religious and sacred places, the construction of the Mosque depended largely on those buildings. Many antique Roman and Greek columns and stones were reused in the construction of the mosque. Even the long walls of the temenos were reused. “The decision to preserve the high *temenos* meant that most of the Mosque walls lacked windows or doors” (Burns 2005, p. 115).

Under the Umayyad dynasty, Calipha Al-Walid started the building of the Umayyad Mosque which is “the second great treasure of Islamic art – the first being the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem” (Burns 2005, p. 27). Al-Walid’s Mosque united the skills of designers and craftsmen from

different parts of the world. Damascus' craftsmen along with those from Egypt, Byzantine Empire, Persia, India and North Africa spent between seven and eight years to finish the construction of the Mosque. This project cost the total income of the Damascus treasury in those years.

The Umayyad Mosque has a rectangle shape encircled by four exterior walls. "The outer walls of the Mosque courtyard are either Roman or reconstructed along the Roman alignment" (Burns 2005, p. 67). The Mosque has four gates: Bab al-Barid, Bab al- Ziadeh, Bab Jairun and Bab al-Amara. In the northern part of the mosque there is a large courtyard, and in the middle of the courtyard there are three important structures: the Treasury Dome, the ablution pool and the Dome of the Clocks.

Qubbat al-Khazna (قبة الخزانة) or Bayt al-Mal (بيت المال) in Arabic, meaning the "Dome of the Treasury", stands at the western end of the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque and has an octagonal structure. The Abbasid Governor of the city, Fadel Bin Salih Bin Ali, erected this structure in 788-9 AD on eight Roman monolith columns which Burns (2005, p.132) suggests are "perhaps all spoil from the columned portico that once bordered the temple's *temenos*". This structure was built to store the treasures of the Mosque. Some old Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Georgian manuscripts were housed in Qubbat al-Khazna in the past. The mosaics on this dome resemble the rest of the mosaic sheets in the rest of the courtyard and the prayer hall facade which are all based on landscape motifs, trees, gardens, rivers and buildings. Darke (2006, p.78) describes it in her book *Syria* as, "dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century it reuses, like the Treasury, eight columns with ancient capitals, no doubt relics rescued from the Roman Temple of Hadad".

The second structure which stands in the middle of the courtyard is the ablution fountain of the Mosque. It is a modern structure, and it is built to add the form of the fountain to the mosque. The third structure, the Dome of the Clocks or Qubbat al-Saat in Arabic, is located in the eastern section of the mosque, and it was built in 780 AD. This form was used to store the mosque's collection of clocks.

The southern part of the mosque is occupied by the sanctuary or the "haram", which is a covered place to perform the prayers in. Three arcades make up the interior space of the sanctuary. Each of the arcades contains two levels. The first level consists of large semi-circular arches, while the second level is made up of double arches. The same pattern is repeated in the arcades of the courtyard. The three interior arcades meet in the center of the sanctuary with a larger, higher arcade that is making a corner to qibla (Grube et al. 1978, p.232).



The largest dome of the mosque is located on top of the center of the prayer hall and it is known as the "Dome of the Eagles" (*Qubbat al-Nisr*) (قبة النسور). The dome has an octagonal shape. It is named after its shape that resembles an eagle; the dome itself is the eagle's head while the eastern and western parts of the prayer hall represent the wings of the eagle.

The Umayyad Mosque has three minarets: Minaret al-Arous, Minaret Issa and Minaret Qaitbay. The Minarets provide a visual focal point and are used for the call to prayer "*adhan*". Minaret al-Arous (Minaret of the Bride) was the first one built and is located on the mosque's northern wall. According to a local legend, the minaret is named after the daughter of a merchant who provided the lead for the minaret's roof and who was later married to a Syrian ruler. Minaret Issa (Minaret of Jesus) is located on the eastern corner of the mosque and it was originally built by the Abbasid in the 9th-century. The western minaret, Minaret Qaitbay or as it is called by local people Minaret al-Gharbiyya was built by Mamluk sultan Qaitbay in 1488 and is named after him.

Burns (2005) describes the mosaics on the walls of the Umayyad Mosque as full of life, in spite of the fact that the images did not include symbolic bodies of humans or animals in order to accord with the new religion. "Instead, on a shimmering gold background was spread a prolific carpet of vegetation and streams interspersed with orchards, palaces, rotundas and houses piled up in a style that seems to borrow elements from many traditions, from oriental to classical, though the predominant idiom was Byzantine seen through a Syrian prism" (Burns 2005, p.117). Every surface in the courtyard was covered by images of Paradise.

The whole theme of the golden-green scenes portrayed on the mosaics revolved around the Koranic paradise; "Here is a picture of the Garden that those mindful of God have been promised: flowing streams and perpetual food and shade" (Qur'an 13:35). The most significant portrait of this paradise is in one of the panels called Barada Panel which portrays the River of Barada and the green orchards around it. In this Panel the idea of Damascus being a Paradise is clearly seen and Barada is the river which keeps this paradise alive. Ibn Jubair, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Muslim traveller, said: "if Paradise be on earth, it is, without a doubt, Damascus; but if it be in Heaven, Damascus is its counterpart on earth" (Burns 1992, p. 72).

Damascus has always been the image of Paradise on earth. Keenan (2000) mentions that one of the legends about Damascus says that Prophet Mohammed refused to enter Damascus because man should enter paradise only once. Another version of the same legend says that the Prophet Mohammed on his way to approach Damascus from the southern suburb of Qadam

stumbled and refused to continue his journey. Moreover, there is a piece of marble with a shape of footprint on it in Al-Qadam Mosque, and “in ancient times it was said that the print was made by Moses, but today it is revered as Mohammed’s” (Keenan, 2000, p. 18).

Many more legends are woven around the Umayyad Mosque. It is said that one prayer there is worth thirty thousand prayers anywhere else. It is also said that no spider ever wove its web there, and no swallow built its nest. Most interestingly, it is believed that one of the marks of the Great Judgment Day is the descend of the Christ from Heaven near Minaret Isa or Jesus Minaret. The legend says that Jesus would do his morning prayer in the Umayyad Mosque with a man called Almahdi and march with the believers of God to Jerusalem to kill the Anti-Christ.

The gathering for the pilgrims in Damascus at the Ottoman period was an annual important festival. Rihlat al-Hajj or pilgrimage journey was protected by the Ottoman Empire and its soldiers and it became the main interest of the Empire. The journey of Hajj had helped in developing the trade and commerce of Damascus. “The *Hajj* was not simply a religious phenomenon. Under Ottoman sponsorship it became ‘the annual opportunity to demonstrate its temporal authority’ and a major commercial operation. The pilgrims (many of them merchants) returned after exchanging goods with others from throughout the Islamic world” (Burns 2005, p. 228).

The Umayyad Empire survived for 90 years. Damascus, by being the capital of this Empire, was provided by all means of luxury and impressive monuments. After the decline of the Umayyad dynasty, Damascus started its decline and centuries of darkness. The worst destruction in the history of the city was by Tamerlane in 1401. After destroying and burning many of the religious and educational endowments of the city, he told the citizens to take refuge in the mosque or the temple and he “gave the orders that when the temple was full, the people inside should be shut up in it. This was done. Then wood was placed around the temple and he ordered it to be ignited and they all perished” (Burns 2005, p. 219). After this massacre, Tamerlane had gathered all the city’s craftsmen and deported them to Samarkand. Therefore, many damascene skills were set back for at least a generation and some of them stopped for ever such as damascening of sword and knife blades.

Salah al-Din Alayubbi, known in the West as Saladin, was the greatest and most purposeful hero of the Islamic world at his time, and an important figure that should be mentioned in the history of Damascus. He is known as the Conqueror of the Kingdom of Heaven and Opponent of Richard the Lionheart. He was the Ayyubiad Sultan of Egypt and Damascus and very well known for his strategic leading of the Battle of Hittin against the Crusaders. He was respected by his

enemies for his courageous principles and became the centre of many European legends about Crusades. “His peaceful takeover of Jerusalem, his respect for the Christian shrines and their guardianship by the churches contrasted with the Crusaders’ 1099 bloodbath addressed indiscriminately against the city’s Muslim, Jewish and even native Christian inhabitants” (Burns 2005, p. 174). The tomb of Saladin lies to the north of the Umayyad Mosque nowadays.

Another important historical symbol in the history of Damascus is Abd al-Qader Algazaeri who arrived in Damascus in 1852. He fought the French bravely for fifteen years in his country, Algeria. In 1860, when the Muslims tried to attack the Christians in Damascus, he started gathering the terrified Christians in groups and took them to the citadel for protection. When he was asked to give away the Christians, he said, “Wretches. Is this the way you honour your prophet? Shame upon you.... Not a Christian will I give up. They are my brothers” (Keenan 2000, p. 162). In his act of chivalry, Abd al-Qader saved hundreds of lives.

Damascus is mentioned in the Bible fifty-five times and all of them are accompanied with the mention of light coming from heaven. In Saint Paul’s Road to Damascus, it is said that he was struck by the famous bolt of light which blinded him on his way to Damascus; “and as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Matthew 5: 9–3).

## Conclusion

Damascus has been inhabited by different civilisations throughout ages, and it has remained in the same place absorbing all these cultures. It is amazing how each layer of history has been built precisely on top of its predecessors for at least three millennia. While all those cultures vanished, Damascus stayed alive. This is also stated in Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad* (Keenan 2000, p.13): “... no recorded event has occurred in the world, but Damascus was in existence to receive the news of it. Go back as far as you will into the vague past, there was always Damascus. To Damascus years are only moments, decades are only flitting trifles of time.... She looked upon the dry bones of a thousand empires and will see the tombs of a thousand more before she dies”.

Indeed, the greatness of Damascus is obvious by the fact that is one of the oldest continuously inhabited capitals in the world. The exploration of the mythical aspects of the city of Damascus is mysterious, refined, and unique since it has always been inhabited throughout ages. It

is nearly impossible to find a united version of any myth relating to the city. Overall, the paper demonstrates that the myth of Damascus lies in its incredibly historical and factual presence throughout ages. Damascus is the myth of Man's continuity and prosperity.

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