

## The Medieval Islamic World Through the Eyes of Two Travelers

Islamic regions, long ignored and misunderstood by many, contain integral information concerning medieval Mediterranean civilizations. Historian Henri Cordier claims, “Westerners have singularly narrowed the history of the world” to their own meager knowledge of historic Israel, Greece, and Rome, ignoring the vast remainder of the different, yet no less civilized, world.<sup>1</sup> The cultures of Islamic regions drew many travelers during the Middle Ages, such as Benjamin of Tudela and Ibn Battuta, for a variety of reasons. Scholars traveled long distances to participate in “the shining prestige of the great cultural centers of the Middle East, notably Cairo and Damascus,” which contained the most substantial intellectual resources.<sup>2</sup> A common misconception of the Islamic city viewed it as “neither the classical *polis* nor the European *burg*; it represented the decay of the former without the capacity to develop into the latter.”<sup>3</sup> The travelogues of Benjamin of Tudela and Ibn Battuta provide firsthand knowledge of the Islamic world, which contradicts the limitations of this view. Far from being a delinquent city, the *medina* (Islamic city), particularly Damascus and Cairo, contributed a great deal of cultural development throughout the Middle Ages, as attested to by travel literature of the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross E. Dunn, The Adventures of Ibn Battuta (Berkeley: U of California, 1989) 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis Goldberg, “Was There an Islamic ‘City’?” Cities in the World-System, ed. Re<sup>o</sup>at Kasaba (New York : Greenwood Press, 1991) 3.

Understanding earlier developments of the Islamic world provides context necessary to our exploration of the later Middle Ages. Cultural elements, far from developing independently, thrive on interaction among various societies. Scholar Ross Dunn refers to the “intercommunicating zone,” through which sedentary and urbanized populations from ancient times linked across the Middle East, India, and China, effectively sharing and borrowing cultural elements.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, this relationship grew, extending across Africa, Asia, and Europe, influencing the entire Eastern hemisphere, and therefore the general human population, with great variation in effect. Throughout this exchange, rural and pastoral populations acquired some cultural elements, as well as periodically impacting urban populations, through cultural and political power. Trade relations formed a complex network across and around the Mediterranean, transporting goods and ideas. By the time of the ‘Abbasid Empire (tenth to thirteenth centuries), the two great sea basins of the world were linked, moving people and ideas throughout the Muslim Empire, contributing to the trend of communication that increased throughout history.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in 1137-38 with a Genoese-Almohad treaty, European merchants developed a rigorous system of trade, extending to North Africa in the 1200s, and to the British Isles and Flanders by 1300.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Habib Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Books, 1991) 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 18.

Military encounters and political regimes also affected cultural movement. During the 1090s, Christians declared the Crusades and moved to establish states in Palestine and Syria, which were eventually reclaimed by the Mamluks. By the end of the twelfth century, Salah al-Din (Saladin) had reclaimed Jerusalem from the Franks, and Muslims had succeeded in fending off the fifth Christian Crusade.<sup>7</sup> The invading non-Muslim Mongol dynasty of the thirteenth century destroyed many Muslim cultural centers; however, the Mamluk dynasty (1250-1517) checked their expansion in Syria, preserving Islamic culture and providing strong cultural centers in Cairo and Damascus. By establishing control over Syria, the Mamluks increased communication, Arabic and Persian served as *linguae francae* for travelers, writers, and matters of state, and Mamluk control continued.<sup>8</sup> Ibn Khaldun wrote in the fourteenth century, “As for the dynasties of our time, the greatest of them is that of the Turks in Egypt,” attesting to Mamluk power.<sup>9</sup>

Damascus, perhaps “the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city,” had a remarkably long history before Benjamin of Tudela or Ibn Battuta visited.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler, The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela (New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1907) xi.

<sup>8</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 88.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>10</sup> Brigid Keenan, Damascus: Hidden Treasures of the Old City (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2000) 6.

As an ancient city located near a fertile oasis, it “lived in close symbiosis with its oasis (the Ghouta),” providing irrigation, fountains, baths, gardens, and a substantial population, including traders.<sup>11</sup> During the Middle Ages, vestiges of Roman culture remained in architecture, including colonnades and door styles.<sup>12</sup> The Umayyad dynasty (661-750) claimed Damascus as its capital, which began a glorious period, “epitomized by the Great Mosque...built by al-Walid, one of Mu‘awiyya’s successors, in AD 705.”<sup>13</sup> After the Crusaders attempted to conquer Damascus twice in the twelfth century, the Mamluk sultan Nur al-Din intervened: when the Franks transferred all their forces during their long siege of Askalon (1153), he claimed Damascus.<sup>14</sup> This action linked Egypt to Syria, allowing business to prosper; al-Din restored the old city’s walls and towers, and reorganized its gates.<sup>15</sup> In the following century, the Mongols greatly damaged the city; however, the Mamluks, led by Baibars, returned to build the great ‘Ablaq Palace and other buildings, including the Yalbogha Mosque in 1347.<sup>16</sup> Medieval travelers to Damascus viewed reminders of history in various aspects, most particularly in the aesthetic element of culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Stefano Bianca, Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2000) 67.

<sup>12</sup> Sandra Benjamin, The World of Benjamin of Tudela: A Medieval Mediterranean Travelogue (London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1995) 205.

<sup>13</sup> Brigid Keenan, op. cit., 25.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 205.

<sup>15</sup> Brigid Keenan, op. cit., 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 47.

The settlement of Fustat, captured from the Byzantines by Arab invaders in 641, provided the location for the Fatimids' tenth-century building of Cairo, their imperial city located just to the north of Fustat.<sup>17</sup> According to Benjamin's *Itinerary*, Fustat had always served as a major river port and commercial center of Egypt, due to a Roman canal, built from the Nile to the Red Sea.<sup>18</sup> The construction of Cairo led to a shift in trade from the Gulf to the Red Sea.<sup>19</sup> The Fatimids left the Azhar mosque, built to facilitate "the teaching of Islam in its Ismai'li form," as well as the *Dar al-'ilm* ('House of Learning'), the second known large library in the Islamic world.<sup>20</sup> Later, the Ayyubids and Mamluks "held court in the Citadel, built by Salah al-Din on the Muqattam hill overlooking the city."<sup>21</sup> Fustat's destruction in 1168, "in order that it might not give shelter to the Franks who had invaded Egypt," explains its presence in Benjamin of Tudela's *Itinerary*, and absence in Ibn Battuta's later *Rihla*.<sup>22</sup> Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) considered Cairo unique: "'metropolis of the world, garden of the universe, meeting-place of nations, ant-hill of peoples, high place of Islam, seat of power'."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 70; Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., pp. 24,40.

<sup>18</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 256.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 44.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 124,200.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>22</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 70.

<sup>23</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 3.

His writing reflects the concentration, during the fourteenth century, of a variety of aspects of culture in Cairo: political, economic, and social organization and ideology, which include aesthetics, communications, and technology. Benjamin of Tudela and Ibn Battuta support Ibn Khaldun's perspective throughout their writings.

Benjamin ben Jonah of Tudela, purportedly the first Mediterranean traveler to write of his journey analytically, traveled for several years.<sup>24</sup> Departing from Tudela (Tuteila to him) in Spain (at his time Navarre) at an unknown date, he lived in Rome during the 1160s until he was forced to leave in 1167, continuing his travels and writing until he arrived in France, "the country of Castile," about 1173, the Jewish year 4933.<sup>25</sup> Tudela, long a Moorish frontier town, fell to the Christians in 1115.<sup>26</sup> It contained one of many small Jewish communities of the region. Located in the irrigated north of Spain, it had an economy focused upon agriculture, allowing trade to flourish.<sup>27</sup> Leaving the Golden Age Spain's Jews were experiencing, Benjamin ventured out on a long journey. Scholars assume adventuresome, methodical Benjamin was a merchant; referred to sometimes as "rabbi," he was respected, but not a rabbi in our sense of the word.<sup>28</sup> His character provides an example of "the Wandering Jew, who kept up communications between one country and another."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, xii.

Aside from his natural aptitude for trade and travel and interest in foreign practices, several reasons have been proposed for his journeying. In addition to general interest among Jewish communities, intercommunication probably became more vital following the Crusades. Extermination and dispersion of Jewish communities en route to Palestine and the most prosperous Jewish communities in Germany, as well as the persecution of Jews in Moorish Cordoba may have prompted Benjamin to seek out places of asylum for expatriated Jews.<sup>30</sup> Approximately two generations separate today from the Holocaust, the same amount of time separating Benjamin's day from the Crusaders' brutal conquest of Palestine.<sup>31</sup> Invasion of the Jewish homeland as well as Spain's Jewish communities probably caused a sense of dislocation for Jews such as Benjamin. Scholar Sandra Benjamin suggests this sentiment combined with the wonder, caused by the influx of devoted Christian pilgrims to Santiago in Spain, led Jews to ask, "Was it like this in ancient times when Jews in Eretz Yisrael went up to Jerusalem?"<sup>32</sup> Such questioning, for Jews in the midst of difficult circumstances, may have prompted earnest consideration of pilgrimage. Jews had dominated the transporting of goods and knowledge "at least three hundred years before Benjamin's time."<sup>33</sup> Perhaps Benjamin's travels coinciding with Christians' increasing control of Mediterranean trade is not coincidental, as commercial interest and piety together provided the impetus for him to make a pilgrimage to the land of his fathers, as well as making a commercial journey throughout the Mediterranean world.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 10.

Benjamin's *Itinerary* offers a Jewish interpretation of many non-Jewish phenomena, presenting to the reader one perspective of Mediterranean life in the twelfth century. As early as the sixteenth century, translations of Benjamin's Hebrew account circulated, becoming a "staple of printed literature."<sup>34</sup> A major contribution to our understanding of geography and ethnology in the Middle Ages, his travelogue focused on the Jews of each city he visited, noting also the size of the city, important structures, and discussing the city's ruler.<sup>35</sup>

Sheikh Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Ibrahim al-Lawati ibn Battuta, also called Ibn Battuta, left his native town of Tangier in 1325 to make the *hajj*; during the year and a half of travel to Mecca, he visited many cities, among them Damascus and Cairo.<sup>36</sup> "Tangier had long been a cosmopolitan town ruled in turn by Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, and Spaniards."<sup>37</sup> Like Benjamin of Tudela, Ibn Battuta grew up in a frontier town, "restless and cosmopolitan...It was the sort of place where a young man might grow up and develop an urge to travel."<sup>38</sup> Born in 1304 to a family of Berber ethnicity, with a background in Islamic law, he received a theological and literary education.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See page 578 of Linda Seidel, "'Shalom Yehudin!' Meyer Schapiro's Early Years in Art History," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.3 (1997): 559-594.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 1.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie, "Ibn Battuta: Prince of Travelers," *National Geographic* Dec. 1991: 2-49) 9.

<sup>38</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Later, as a man with Maliki juridical training, he became an *'alim*, man of learning, and a member of the *'ulama*, the religious, intellectual, and political, elite. He was adamantly Sunni Muslim, influenced by Sufi ideas, and perhaps by members of the Tunisian elite he visited as a young man, “masters of refined taste and that union of piety and restrained worldliness that Ibn Battuta would exemplify in adulthood.”<sup>40</sup>

We know much more of Ibn Battuta’s personality than we do of Benjamin’s; some of Ibn Battuta’s “less fortunate traits” included impatience, profligacy, impetuosity, and pious self-righteousness.<sup>41</sup> He married, and acquired as consorts, many women throughout his travels. His highest values included the “universalist spiritual, moral, and social values” of the Dar al-Islam.<sup>42</sup>

Ibn Battuta’s manner of conducting his journey, and the activities he pursued while traveling, reveal much about him and his age. He first led a caravan early in his journey, and later gained many occupations, including pilgrim, jurist, courtier, mystic, politician, diplomat, explorer, and, according to some, the first ethnographer. Ibn Battuta meandered twenty-nine years, “relying on serendipitous discoveries of good companionship to determine his itinerary” with a habit of never traveling the same road twice.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>43</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., pp. 114,9.

He recorded his observations in the form of a *rihla*, or book of travels. A courtly and urbane man, Ibn Battuta “sought out educated, pious, or powerful Muslims,” exchanging tales of his travels and religious wisdom for often lavish hospitality.<sup>44</sup> While traveling, he met with members of the Muslim elite and continued studying, undertaking his first formal studies abroad in Damascus, while waiting for its *hajj* caravan to begin.<sup>45</sup>

His motivation for traveling seems complex, including piety, intellectual endeavor, and a background of diversity. Perhaps travelers’ tales inspired him, fellow sojourners encouraging him throughout his travels. Apparently he had a desire to see the world; as he wrote after his travels, “ ‘I have indeed—praise be to God—attained my desire in this world, which was to travel through the earth, and I have attained in this respect what no other person has attained to my knowledge’.”<sup>46</sup> Apparently he also felt a great attachment for his homeland, deciding on his final return to remain in al-Maghrib (Morocco). He died in 1368 or 9 (700 AH).<sup>47</sup> His *Rihla* provides us with documentation of some 75, 000 miles (three times the length of Marco Polo’s travels) through the equivalent of forty-four present countries.<sup>48</sup> Time was no object, and he preferred overland travel to seafaring, allowing him to observe more of medieval culture. Ibn Battuta’s priorities determined his itinerary, and inform us of the traveling Muslim scholar.

During Benjamin’s visit, Damascus was the capital of Nur al-Din’s empire, and a frontier town of the Mamluk empire of the Togarmin (Turks).

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie. op. cit., 9.

<sup>45</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 61.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 19,318.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie. op. cit., 8.

<sup>49</sup> The traveler approaching Damascus in the Middle Ages did so via a mountain track, allowing the first view of Damascus from above.<sup>50</sup> Legends tell of the Prophet Muhammad traveling to Damascus “along this mountain road, but when he saw the enchanting vista of the city at his feet he decided not to continue his journey because ‘man should only enter Paradise once’.”<sup>51</sup> According to Benjamin, the Talmud refers to Damascus as “the gateway to the Garden of Eden.”<sup>52</sup> The city seems linked by legend to images of paradise, as “Muslims [also] honored Damascus as the earthly equivalent of Paradise.”<sup>53</sup> Such associations seem logical, considering the often harsh environment of the Middle East; a Semitic concept of paradise consisted of the walled garden, or oasis, characterized by water, fragrance, fruit trees, and shady places for sitting.<sup>54</sup> To a road-weary desert traveler, the steady irrigation of Damascus established it as a seemingly heavenly place.

Benjamin refers to Damascus as “the great city,” describing it by its industrious atmosphere, beauty, excellent climate, and high walls, estimating that gardens and plantations extended about fifteen miles from each side of the city, and claiming Damascus as the richest fruit-growing district in the world.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Brigid Keenan, *op. cit.*, 16.

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

<sup>52</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 205.

<sup>53</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> Stefano Bianca. *op. cit.*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 29.

He describes two rivers: the Amana, which flowed through the city, through aqueducts, into wealthy houses, streets, bathhouses, and markets, and the Pharpar, which flowed through gardens and plantations.<sup>56</sup> Ghuta, the lush fruit-growing region outside of Damascus contained market gardens, blurring the boundaries between urban and rural areas.<sup>57</sup> Damascus' dark, narrow city streets were heavy with the scents of spices, a reminder of the city's considerable trade by international merchants.<sup>58</sup>

Benjamin claims Damascus conducted trade with all countries.<sup>59</sup> Economic organization centered upon the *suq*, or marketplace; Benjamin praises the bazaars of textiles, wood, and paper made of cotton, a centuries-old item in Damascus already.<sup>60</sup> He also raves about the city's famous brocade, even better than Greek brocade; he considers Damascus' weavers as the best in the world, though weaving is not a highly valued occupation in either the Talmud or the Qur'an.<sup>61</sup> There were also organized societies of commerce and finance in Damascus, testimony to the structured control of Mamluk cities, especially concerning economic activity.<sup>62</sup> Throughout his travels, Benjamin probably experienced camaraderie with fellow Jews, particularly with the numerous traders.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 113.

<sup>58</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 205.

<sup>59</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 30.

<sup>60</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 205.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 45.

Jews generally lived in the southeast section of the city, Christians in the northeast, and Muslims in the western part, around the citadel, and in the north, around the Umayyad Mosque.<sup>64</sup>

Benjamin writes about Damascus' quarters, divided according to nationality, each with its own bazaar, caravanserai, place of worship, and cemetery.<sup>65</sup> He found residential interiors to be different from those of Spain, decorated with remarkable textiles: carpets, cushions, and no chairs.<sup>66</sup> Benjamin remarks that Damascus offered a high standard of health care, including two hospitals; he comments only on the newer one, built twelve years earlier, which offered free health care.<sup>67</sup> The city also contained many academies and places of Jewish worship; he mentions two in particular, on the city's outskirts.

Benjamin was especially struck by the Umayyad Mosque ("the synagogue of Damascus"), also known as the Great Mosque.<sup>68</sup> Said to have been the Palace of Ben Hadad, then a Roman temple, and then a Christian church, it was famous for its mosaics of other Muslim towns.<sup>69</sup> He describes its unusual features, beginning with one wall built by witchcraft, which was constructed of glass of many colors, and used to tell time by the sun's rays.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 207.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 206.

He writes about rooms of gold and glass, gold and silver-coated columns, and marble columns of all colors, as well as gold and silver tubs large enough for three men to bathe in them together.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, he mentions a great rib, suspended from the ceiling, two by nine spans (perhaps thirty-two by one hundred forty-four inches), known from tradition and a grave's inscription to be that of Abramaz, king Anak of giants.<sup>72</sup> Not long after construction of the Dome of the Rock in 692, construction of a series of great mosques began in several cities; Damascus was among the first cities graced with these standard buildings designed to accommodate communal ritual prayer.<sup>73</sup> Each featured a courtyard, leading to a room where rows of worshippers faced Mecca, indicated by the *mihrab* (niche), and heard sermons delivered every Friday from *minbars* (special seats, pulpits). Attached or near to each mosque, a minaret rose high above the city streets, allowing the muezzin to be heard by all.<sup>74</sup> Benjamin probably observed only the outside of such mosques, and certainly heard the muezzin's call throughout each day; it is unclear whether or not he entered the Umayyad mosque. His view contrasts to that of Ibn Battuta, as he identifies with the minority, offering an outsider's view of this mosque.

Identifying with the Jewish population, he characteristically writes about Damascus' Jewish population; he numbers its members at three thousand (including only the heads of families), and notes that the community includes many learned, rich men.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>72</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 30.

<sup>73</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 28.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 30.

One such man was the head of the Academy of Israel (of the Palestinian Gaonate), head of the *beth din* (court), and a lecturer; there were also scholars, a warden, and a physician.<sup>76</sup>

Many were the grandsons of Palestinian refugees; as a result, probably there were more Jews in Damascus than in Frankish lands (France) at this time.<sup>77</sup> Within the Jewish community, the one hundred Karaï tes and four hundred Cuthim had peaceful relations, though they did not intermarry.<sup>78</sup> Jews, though employed in many occupations, most commonly worked in textiles and glass; some worked in the royal textile factory and mint; some worked as financiers, tax collectors, or physicians.<sup>79</sup> Benjamin reports that Damascus' Jewish community "maintain[ed] close ties with the Jews of Cairo."<sup>80</sup>

Ibn Battuta, entering Damascus on 9 August 1326 (9 Ramadan 726), describes it as "an exceeding noble, glorious, and beauteous city," remarking on its abundant material goods, such as foods, spices, textiles, and perfumes.<sup>81</sup> He too noticed its "waters, rivers, brooks, and fountains, cunningly arranged."<sup>82</sup> From 1313 to 1340, the viceroy of Damascus, who Ibn Battuta held in high regard, served also as a builder and city planner, endowing *waqfs*, expanding residential areas, widening walking areas, and reducing "the surplus population of stray dogs."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>77</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., pp. 206,204.

<sup>78</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., 30.

<sup>79</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 206.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 58.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 60.

As Asian capital of the Mamluk empire, Damascus contained “magnificent households of the high commanders,” and impressive royal armies, stocks of provisions and weapons, and garrison.<sup>84</sup> The Mamluks restored the Umayyad Mosque and irrigation system throughout the thirteenth century, sank wells, and erected tombs, bridges, schools, baths, mosques, and other monuments.<sup>85</sup> They greatly impacted the aesthetic culture, including decorative tile work, exquisite *mihlabs*, enchanting courtyards, intricate ceilings, colored paste work, exceptional stone work, and decorative doors remarked upon by many travelers to Damascus throughout history.

Since the Mamluk occupation of Damascus, trade routes had reopened, and Ibn Battuta “saw Damascus in the flush of a new prosperity.”<sup>86</sup> The main route from Cairo to Damascus became “the royal road of the kingdom,” transporting among other things textiles, glass, and artisans from Syria, and textiles, grain, and soldiers from Egypt.<sup>87</sup> The flourishing population grew, reaching perhaps fifty to one hundred thousand people by the fifteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Damascus’ cultural revival, aside from its political, aesthetic and economic renewal, included an intellectual florescence, which Ibn Battuta does not describe in great detail.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>85</sup> Brigid Keenan, op. cit., 47.

<sup>86</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 59.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>88</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 111.

<sup>89</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 30.

Central to the city's religious institutions was the Umayyad Great Mosque.<sup>90</sup> Unlike Benjamin, Ibn Battuta most likely spent many hours within the mosque, "sitting beneath the marble columns of the golden-domes sanctuary."<sup>91</sup> A place of continuous religious activity, Ibn Battuta numbers the staff of mosque officials: seventy muezzins, thirteen imams, and six hundred reciters of the Qur'an.<sup>92</sup> In contrast to Benjamin's mythic tales of the Palace of Ben Hadad, Ibn Battuta presents the mosque as a vibrant symbol of God's glory. Within Ibn Battuta's twenty-four day stay in Damascus, he continued his studies, fasted for Ramadan, and married the daughter of a local Moroccan resident, before departing on the *hajj* caravan.<sup>93</sup> He found Damascus the most remarkable city in "the East," second to Shiraz, for its beautiful bazaars, fruit-gardens, and rivers."<sup>94</sup>

When Benjamin arrived in Cairo c.1170, the Fatimid caliph, El-Adid, was administering Egypt prosperously with the immense assistance of Salah al-Din, his vizier.<sup>95</sup> Dominating the new part (Tso'an) of Cairo's city structures was the caliph's immense palace, surrounded by large military quarters, ministerial buildings, and government offices, all "protected by massive walls and imposing Norman-like gates."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>96</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. op. cit., ix.

He wrote of the administration, “They hire from amongst all nations warriors called Barbarians to fight with the Sultan of the Seljuks; for the natives are not warlike, but are as women who have no strength to fight.”<sup>97</sup>

The ruler made a public appearance twice per year, in honor of Ramadan and the rising of the Nile.<sup>98</sup> The first appearance, a time of religious festivity, provides an example of celebration common among other regions, though distinct ritual variations existed. The second, perhaps echoing earlier Egyptian rituals, had developed into a science. In the month of Elul, the Nile irrigated land to a distance of fifteen days’ journeying, Benjamin wrote, the water remaining on the land through the months of Elul and Tishri.<sup>99</sup> Marcus Adler, son of the chief Rabbi of Britain, wrote a critical commentary of Benjamin’s *Itinerary* in 1907. On the south side of the Nile’s Isle of Rhoda, Adler writes, the Nilometer, a marble pillar, rises from a square well.<sup>100</sup> This octagonal column, decorated with Cufic inscriptions, Benjamin estimated at rising 12 cubits above ground, though Adler records a height of 17 cubits (due to frequent repairs, he explains).<sup>101</sup> Adler writes the “Sheikh of the Nile proclaims the *Wefa*, i.e., that the height of the water necessary for irrigating...has been attained” when the water reaches a height of 15.6 cubits.<sup>102</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 70.

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

<sup>99</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 259.

<sup>100</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

After daily measuring, this public proclamation is met by praises to the Creator, for famine results if no flood allows sowing; landowners hire men to dig trenches in order to collect fish in pools to eat and sell later for food and lamp oil.<sup>103</sup> Benjamin's curiosity prompted him to ask why the Nile rose, and he concluded the rising resulted from heavy rains in Abyssinia.<sup>104</sup> As part of this cycle, the Egyptians harvested plenteous seasonal produce. Benjamin's account presents with admiration the Nile region's fertility, marveling that the inhabitants have never seen ice, snow, or rain.<sup>105</sup> Most of Cairo's thousands of Jews resided, intermingled with Christians, within Cairo's older suburbs (Fustat) on the Nile banks, built in the seventh and eighth centuries; Benjamin refers to two in particular collectively as "Mizraim."<sup>106</sup> Fustat was defined by a Roman fortress of sturdy walls, sometimes referred to as the "Castle of Babylon," "Fortress of the Greeks," or "Fortress of the Candles."<sup>107</sup> Wealthier Jews chose to relocate in newer Cairo, which was cleaner, more elegant, and located nearby, though not near enough to visit the newer Cairo's main Jewish street on the Sabbath.<sup>108</sup> Benjamin found the Jews residing in Fustat generally less wealthy and friendlier; some Cairene Jews, though, were very wealthy.<sup>109</sup> Jews were left undisturbed if they maintained order, and paid their taxes.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>106</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 70; Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 256.

<sup>107</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 257.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Scholar Sandra Benjamin suspects high taxes may have led to conversion and poverty among Jews, alluding to Muslims' envy of industrious Jews and the persecution of regional Jews once one hundred fifty years earlier causing trepidation among Jews in Benjamin's day.<sup>111</sup> Jews had freedom in their choice of occupation, and were often employed as "agents, financiers, and physicians" in the royal court.<sup>112</sup> Occasionally Jews supervised non-Jewish field laborers on farms.<sup>113</sup> Most Jews worked in textiles, selling thread, and trading, Fustat weavers specializing in the production of linen warp cloth.<sup>114</sup> Jewish vendors sold kosher wine openly in the Street of the Wine-Sellers, and Benjamin remarks that Egyptian Muslims were more likely to drink wine than Moors.<sup>115</sup> Fustat had an entire bazaar of consignment clothing shops.<sup>116</sup> Some Jews were involved in the Square of the Perfumers, selling plants and plant parts; though some plant wholesale shops refused to sell to individuals, the shops of Fustat sold only small amounts, and dealt with any customer.<sup>117</sup> Benjamin adds the facts that pharmacies were always separate from physicians, and that certain dyes had meanings, often indicating ethnicity or religion (e.g. green reserved for Muslims).<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>118</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 70.

Two large Fustat synagogues competed for congregants, representing religious traditions of Palestine (from Syria) and Babylon (from Iraq), and therefore differing in patterns of reading the Pentateuch.<sup>119</sup> The latter was smaller, established three hundred years earlier, by immigrants who utilized a converted church.<sup>120</sup> The former and larger, known as the “Ezra synagogue,” featured a well for washing hands, an orchard, old relics and manuscripts, and served as a meeting place for judges.<sup>121</sup> Cairo’s strong economy consisted largely of international trade, as reflected in its official system of monetary exchange, and its busy markets. Benjamin was surprised to see buildings with five to seven floors.<sup>122</sup> Wealthy homes received water regularly, carried by men, camels, or donkeys; every house disposed of its used water in pits, and its wastes through pipes, or by workmen who sold them to gardeners.<sup>123</sup>

The Jews of Fustat pledged money to a communal fund, which they used to support the poor (providing bread twice per week, and new clothing twice per year), and to fulfill other community needs.<sup>124</sup> They no longer supplied lodging for travelers free of charge; instead, they maintained *funduqs* (inns), and rented many properties.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 257.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

Jewish travelers, Benjamin explains, were eventually expected to take on increasing responsibility, contributing to the Jewish community in the case of an extended stay.<sup>126</sup> Both synagogues provided bed and medicines for needy travelers and employed women as beadles in return for money, food, and clothing; however, Benjamin did not consider Cairo's Jews to be very observant, remarking that all the wise men were immigrants.<sup>127</sup> The official representative of Egypt's Jews, Rabbi Nathanel, was attached to the court of the king, president of the Jewish Academy, and may have been Salah al-Din's physician.<sup>128</sup>

In the early half of the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta encountered Cairo as an affluent metropolis at its intellectual peak, due to al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qala'un's competent Mamluk rule, which had temporarily "struck a congenial balance between harsh, swaggering authoritarianism and a love of civilized taste and comfort."<sup>129</sup> Ibn Battuta seems overwhelmed on discovering Cairo overflowing with "the sheer crush of humanity," before Black Death later in the century would reduce the population about thirty percent.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Sandra Benjamin. *op. cit.*, 259; Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>128</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, pp. 48,60.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 45; Albert Habib Hourani. *op. cit.*, 213.

<sup>130</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 45.

Historian Ross Dunn explains Cairo's phenomenal growth by its political status as Mamluk capital, its location at the intersection of the spice route from the Red Sea and "the trade and pilgrimage roads from the Maghrib and sub-Saharan West Africa," and its position as "permanent refuge" in the wake of thirteenth-century Mongolian invasion.<sup>131</sup> The close relationship between Jews and Muslims in Cairo and other cities had gradually diminished since Benjamin's visit, ending "the creative period of Jewish culture in the world of Islam."<sup>132</sup>

Symbol of Mamluk power and independence, the Citadel towered over Cairo. Built on a rocky hill by Salah al-Din, seven years after Benjamin of Tudela's visit to Cairo, it included offices, residences, stables, mosques, and the palace.<sup>133</sup> This separation from the populace seems appropriate to a ruling elite of foreigners, "unequivocally loyal to the state."<sup>134</sup> Also changed since Benjamin's age, the Mamluk Empire extended past Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, to Asia Minor and countries bordering the Red Sea.<sup>135</sup> The Mamluk habit of increasingly building in stone left a strong visual reminder of authority, both in the past and the present; some thirty mosques, various civic and charitable projects, a canal, a hospital were built during al-Nasir's reign.<sup>136</sup> Ibn Battuta found the hospital of free service impressive.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>131</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. *op. cit.*, 187.

<sup>132</sup> Marcus Nathan Adler. *op. cit.*, 70; Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 47.

<sup>133</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 47.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>136</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie. *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>137</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. *op. cit.*, 124.

The Azhar mosque served as the main communal mosque, and a center of Sunni teaching.<sup>138</sup> Nearby it stood the shrine of Husayn (a Sufi “saint”), visited by Shi’is and Sunnis alike; surrounding streets led to mosques, schools, shops, and warehouses.<sup>139</sup> Within the walls of al-Qahirah (Cairo), existed over thirty *suqs* and numerous *funduqs*.<sup>140</sup> *Madrasas* (colleges) taught “revealed and linguistic sciences,” particularly law; the *madrasa* of Sultan Hasan taught all four Sunni schools of thought.<sup>141</sup> Sciences such as mathematics and medicine were also available.<sup>142</sup> Touring Mamluk monuments, and probably learning in the *madrasas*, Ibn Battuta spent at least a month in Cairo.<sup>143</sup>

Aesthetic culture, in architecture and the arts, enters regularly into Benjamin and Ibn Battuta’s travel accounts. An integral part of any society, medieval Islamic architecture was no exception; as Ibn Abdûn, a twelfth-century judge wrote in an urban management manual, “As far as architecture is concerned, it is the haven where man’s spirit, soul and body find refuge and shelter.”<sup>144</sup> Certainly, architecture and architects are linked, influencing one another. The “organic” growth of Islamic cities differs greatly from “planned uniformity,” resulting from a variety of cultural and environmental factors.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 46.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 51; Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 163.

<sup>141</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 51.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>143</sup> Stefano Bianca. op. cit., 23.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 70.

The two construction techniques of traditional Islamic architecture, the “age-old Mesopotamian tradition of building with sun-dried or burned clay bricks and the stonemasonry of northern Syria and Armenia,” reflect environmental features of the early and medieval Islamic world.<sup>146</sup> Both Cairo and Damascus hold vestiges of the Middle Ages in monumental architecture, Cairo more than any other Islamic city, due to “the Citadel and the palaces of the Mamluks,” tomb mosques, and other structures.<sup>147</sup> Islamic urban form, as seen in accounts of Cairo and Damascus, consist of the residential unit, the mosque and related welfare buildings, and trade and production structures. Each form, as well as city layout and Islamic orientation, is influenced by “distinct socio-religious practices of the Muslim society.”<sup>148</sup> Part of many Islamic cities’ organic growth patterns included the re-use of Roman-Hellenistic structures. In Damascus, for example, the Umayyad mosque, originally a Roman temple, and then a church, became an important symbol of Islam in Syria. The gradual occupation of wide, central Roman avenues, representative of civic pride, by small merchants’ booths, representative of family focus, provides an example of how continuous daily practices, customs, values, and rituals gradually transformed Roman grid patterns into more irregular patterns.<sup>149</sup> As the houses in such cities grew together, they reflected the Islamic world’s “internalized access system with private corridors, dead-end lanes and cul-de-sacs.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. *op. cit.*, 190.

<sup>147</sup> Stefano Bianca. *op. cit.*, 70.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. *op. cit.*, 132.

The *Itinerary* and *Rihla* document the medieval Islamic city structure from firsthand experience. In the traditional *medina* (town), the government operated at a distance from the urban community. The authorities during Benjamin and Ibn Battuta's accounts both maintained their administrations at a distance, whether raised on a hill or in a neighboring country, from the people of Damascus and Cairo. The travelogues attest to traditional government positions, including treasury, army administration, and the military, often formed by rural citizens or foreign captives.<sup>151</sup>

The traditional court is not necessarily mentioned by either account, however they certainly include mosques, as well as synagogues. Schools of law are mentioned, in different proportions, determined by the author. Sometimes the accounts mention nearby shrines, again the author's identity greatly determining the travelogue's content. The central presence of religious buildings, in both accounts, testifies to the primary role religion held within the medieval Islamic city, particularly in public life.

The *suq*, as attested to by both travelers, served as the major location of economic exchange. Both accounts reveal details of trade and trade routes unique to Cairo and Damascus during the travelers' visits. Apart from the commercial life of the cities, small streets and cul-de-sacs led off from main thoroughfares, forming quarters. As mentioned in the travelogues, they were often identified by religion, economic status, or ethnicity, forming microcosmic communities of solidarity. Houses, according to location and inhabitants, were huts, apartments, or large buildings of stone or brick, lining alleys.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>152</sup> Brigid Keenan, op. cit., 6.

Traditional Damascene houses contained many rich textiles and combined the indoors and the outdoors, the hidden and the revealed, the warm and the cozy, the cool and the airy, products of the environment and local life style.<sup>153</sup>

During a time when religion greatly defined one's identity, the traveler often relied upon fellow believers. Travelers, whether by land or by sea, brave many dangers; the Middle Ages offered many risks to a traveler, including natural disasters, bandits and pirates, wars and disease. Both Benjamin and Ibn Battuta associated themselves with religious communities on entering cities, receiving shelter, sustenance, references, and associates.

During the Middle Ages, the Islamic world contained "the main centers of Jewish population and religious culture."<sup>154</sup> Benjamin's *Itinerary* documents significant Jewish contributions to medieval Mediterranean culture, strongly disproving the misconception that "all medieval Jews were confined to ghettos and moneylending."<sup>155</sup> On the contrary, they flourished in many occupations, often prosperous and generous. The Jewish traveler benefited from established, sometimes affluent Jewish communities in medieval Muslim cities.

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<sup>153</sup> Albert Habib Hourani. op. cit., 186.

<sup>154</sup> Sandra Benjamin. op. cit., 11.

<sup>155</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 9.

Traveling throughout the Dar al-Islam (World of Islam), the Muslim traveler received charity and hospitality, as well as camaraderie, offered especially to Muslim travelers and pilgrims. Ibn Battuta also found local employment; being trained in the *Shari'a*, he was presumably as acceptable a magistrate in the Maldives as in Morocco. This unity within a vast area, caused by a common Islamic culture, allowed the Muslim traveler to be accepted as a “citizen” of the diverse Islamic realm, which was not yet fragmented by the colonial intrusions of Christian Europeans. Though some consider Islamic civilization’s status following the ‘Abbasid dynasty as a time characterized by decline, Dunn states, “the Islamic Middle Period,” 1000 to 1500 A.D., “witnessed a steady and remarkable expansion of Islam, not simply as a religious faith but as a coherent, universalist model of civilized life.”<sup>156</sup> Such renewal no doubt affected the cultural lives of both Damascus and Cairo, and afforded great assistance to the Muslim traveler. Islamic scholars throughout the known world looked to “Cairo, Damascus, and the Holy Cities of the Hijaz” for intellectual and spiritual direction, contributing to the mobility of the Islamic elite.<sup>157</sup>

Damascus and Cairo served the Muslim world as departure centers for the major *hajj* caravans; large and well organized, they spent fifty-five days marching to Mecca.<sup>158</sup> The *hajj*

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>157</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie. op. cit., 15.

<sup>158</sup> Ross E. Dunn. op. cit., 27.

was often cited as the reason for various personal excursions to the Middle East.<sup>159</sup> Clearly, from Ibn Battuta's writings, the *hajj* continued in much the same manner throughout the Middle Ages as it did in earlier and later periods, conducting the same sacred rituals.<sup>160</sup> Throughout Ibn Battuta's travels, he asked for Allah's guidance when he departed, much as travelers throughout the Muslim world have in earlier and later periods.<sup>161</sup> Islam emerges as an ever-present influence in Ibn Battuta's *Rihla*, his travels, and the Islamic world of the past and into the future.

The travel accounts of Benjamin of Tudela and Ibn Battuta contain compelling images of Islamic cultural centers, such as Damascus and Cairo, contributing to our understanding of medieval Mediterranean societies. Each city, composed of many cultural layers, reflected its dense history. Often such historical influence surfaced in the aesthetic, visual components of cities. Benjamin of Tudela, twelfth-century Spanish Jew, and Ibn Battuta, fourteenth-century Moroccan Muslim, provide eyewitness accounts that reveal different aspects of life in the Middle Ages. Though their motivations for travel differ, both acquired a wide range of experiences, probably enriching their own intellects, as well as our understanding today. Ibn Khaldun of the fourteenth century wrote, "A scholar's education is greatly improved by traveling in quest of knowledge and meeting the authoritative teachers (of his time)."<sup>162</sup> So the medieval traveler, as well as we who follow them on their travels through their accounts, grow in understanding life in medieval Islamic cities.

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas J. Abercrombie. *op. cit.*, 19.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>162</sup> Ross E. Dunn. *op. cit.*, 1.