

The Miṣr of Ayla: New Evidence for the Early Islamic City

Introduction

The "Islamic city" is a much discussed phenomenon; among the many aspects of this problem is the character of urbanization in the early Islamic period.¹ The early Islamic cities, the innovations of the seventh and eighth centuries, had a powerful influence on subsequent urbanism in Islamic regions. Consideration of this subject has received a new impetus from recent archaeological research.

The problem of understanding the early Islamic city is bound with the creation of the *amṣār* (sing. *miṣr*), or military camps. It was the establishment of these *amṣār* which defined the process of urban foundation through regional incorporation into the Muslim empire (Dār al-Islām). Until now, the topography of not one of the *amṣār* has been studied from an archaeological perspective; this is not surprising in that many of the better known (al-Fuṣṭāṭ [Cairo], al-Baṣra, al-Kūfa, Shīrāz) continued to grow and develop, even up to modern times, thus obscuring the earliest phases. Nevertheless, as Sauvaget has clearly shown, earlier plans can often be deduced from the later palimpsest by using good city plans.² The search for these earliest foundations is usually possible, needing only initial hypotheses to guide the researcher.

This paper will suggest that the *amṣār* developed out of two differing urban traditions. The first is the orthogonal city plan found in the Classical cities of the

Near East and particularly those of the Decapolis. A morphological correlate of this city type was the legionary camp, which became a model for the core of the *amṣār*. Examples of this developmental trajectory are Ayla, the desert castles, 'Anjar, and ar-Ramla. The second, but no less important, tradition of urban planning was that of south Arabia.³ This urban type is far less defined but a model may be constructed from Umm al-Jimāl, with amplifications based on Mābiyāt and especially al-Madīna. Finally it will be postulated that the great capital of *Miṣr*, al-Fuṣṭāṭ, may have blended both of these urban traditions into a new entity, the early Islamic city.⁴

A. The *Miṣr* of Ayla

The first postulate of this paper is that the early Islamic site of Ayla was founded as a *miṣr*, adjacent to an earlier Byzantine town (Ailana, see below).⁵ While no documentary evidence for dating this foundation is available, the period within the caliphate of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, about A.D. 650, is likely.⁶ Literary evidence confirms this date through the traditional association of Ayla with the Umayyad family and later references to some of its original residents as *mawālī* (clients or partisans) of 'Uthmān.⁷ Further, 'Uthmān's support for mercantile expansion may be seen in his development of the ports of al-Baṣra and Jidda (and perhaps the ports on the Levantine coast under his governor, Mu'āwiya). The foun-

¹ The literature on Islamic cities is vast; for one critical overview, see J. L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Islamic City — Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance,' *IJMES* 19 (1987), 155-176.

² J. Sauvaget's brilliant work is best known in 'Le plan de Laodicée-sur-Mer,' *BEO* 4 (1934), 81-114; and *Alep, essai sur le développement d'une grande ville syrienne, des origines au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1941). The exclusive identification of orthogonal plans with the Classical city in the Middle East is countered by E. Wirth, 'Die Orientalische Stadt,' *Saeculum* 26 (1975), 63.

³ This urban tradition is postulated as having its developmental core in pre-Islamic south Arabia (Yemen) and having spread northward during the first half of the first millennium A.D. Description as "south Arabian" and "Arabian" will be used interchangeably for present purposes.

⁴ A preliminary version of this paper was read at the workshop, 'Land Use and Settlement Patterns in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East,' the Late Antiquity and Early Islam Research Project, London, 1991 (repeated in the panel, 'The Amsar: New Perspectives on the Early Islamic City,' MESA

conference, 1991).

⁵ The suggestion that the excavated site of Ayla was a *miṣr* was first presented in 'First Report,' 266. and 'Umayyads,' 174-176 (see n. 10 for Aqaba bibliography).

⁶ Archaeological evidence for this foundation date is presented in Whitcomb, 'Umayyads,' 167-172 based on eight stratigraphic soundings. The ceramic assemblages, generally from 3-4.5m below surface, had an impressive consistency (confirmed by further work in 1988 through 1993 and separate investigations of nearby kilns); these types are usually described stylistically as late Byzantine (sixth-seventh centuries A.D.). Though the water table has interfered with further digging, there is no indication of Roman levels (third-fourth centuries) beneath this phase (rarely, earlier Nabataean sherds are found in all levels). Thus, initial occupation of this site may be placed in the seventh century, under the Rashidun or first Umayyad caliphs, before ceramic traditions began to change.

⁷ See Whitcomb, 'Umayyads,' 174-175.

dation of a new port at al-‘Aqaba would fit well with this pattern of commercial development.

Historical evidence indicates that there was a pre-Islamic town at al-‘Aqaba, here called Ailana to distinguish it from early Islamic Ayla. The bishop of Ailana made a treaty with the Prophet well before the Muslim conquest. For the locational relationship of the *miṣr* of Ayla to the Byzantine town, one may turn to the widely-traveled geographer, al-Muqaddasi:

Wayla, a city on the edge of the branch of the China Sea, is very prosperous, ...the port of Palestine and the storehouse of the Ḥijāz. The people call it Ayla, but the ruins of Ayla are nearby....⁸

This [true] Ayla, which al-Muqaddasi thought was Elath, the “town by the sea” mentioned in the Qur’ān and Bible, now may be identified with the vast ruin field of the Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine town. Surface sherding to the northwest of the early Islamic city walls, for a distance of about 500 meters, has produced concentrations of sherds of these periods. The slight mounding of this area suggests that the remains of the Byzantine town lie next to the Islamic town and it is these extensive ruins which could still be seen in the 10th century.⁹

The discovery and delineation of the plan of the early Islamic city of Ayla is the result of recent excavations (from 1986 through 1993; FIG. 1).¹⁰ These excavations have revealed a walled city with towers and four gates, preserved 4.5m in height. A length of some 80 meters of the northwest city wall was cleared in 1987, including two semi-circular towers flanking the Egyptian gate (Bāb Miṣr). In 1988 two further gates, the Sea gate (Bāb al-Baḥr) and southeast gate (Bāb al-Ḥijāz), were discovered. The plan of the city (165 x 140m) is marked by axial streets dividing the town into four quadrants. The

central crossing originally had a tetrapylon, excavated in 1987; this building later became a wealthy merchant’s residence.

At our present stage of research, the plan of the fortified complex, or *miṣr*, of Ayla shows irregularities resulting from later structural changes during the Abbasid and Fatimid periods (ninth - 11th centuries). There is discernible, however, an original plan characterized by formal elements done in Byzantine style. This fine, early construction may be seen in the monumental and well-carved arched gateways and the arches of the tetrapylon. Further, the massive towers are based on much earlier prototypes and do not seem primarily defensive (see below). The artifactual assemblage accompanying these early structures continues the late Byzantine style typologically, as one might expect.¹¹

B. Orthogonal Cities and Military Camps

There is no direct evidence for the configuration of an Arab military camp in the early Islamic or immediately pre-Islamic periods. The apparent militaristic character of Ayla derives from the similarity in plan between these remains and Roman/Byzantine legionary camps. The suggestion that Ayla was actually built as the camp of the 10th Fretensis legion, briefly stationed at ‘Aqaba during the fourth century, has no archaeological basis.¹² An alternative interpretation, which better fits the evidence, is that the urban plan of Ayla takes its inspiration from remains of older Roman camps, which in turn reflect the prevalent style of orthogonal planning.

There are important comparisons between the fortified complex being excavated at al-‘Aqaba and Roman legionary forts (especially in southern Jordan). Architectural comparison may be based on parallels with the legionary camps at al-Lajjūn¹³ and Udhrūh¹⁴ in Jordan.

⁸ Al-Muqaddasi, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma‘rifat al-Aqālim*, (M. de Goeje, ed.) (Leiden, 1906; BGA 3), 179. His use of the name, “Wayla,” is apparently a diminutive and suggestive of the extent of Byzantine ruins still visible in the 10th century.

⁹ Archaeological evidence for the pre-Islamic settlement has recently been surveyed; west of the site of Ayla, the remains of this Nabataean/early Roman site are at least 250 x 200m in extent. Preliminary descriptions may be found in Whitcomb, *The Oriental Institute, Annual Report 1989-1990* (1991, 45-48) and in J. Meloy, *ADAJ* 35 (1991), 397-414.

¹⁰ The excavations in al-‘Aqaba are a joint project sponsored by the University of Chicago and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan under the direction of the author. The success of this project is due to the assistance of many individuals, especially Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Dr. Dureid Mahasneh, and Mr. Mohammad Balqar. Funding was provided by the University of Chicago, National Geographic Society and USAID.

Results of these excavations appear in a series of articles: D. Whitcomb, ‘Excavations in Aqaba: First preliminary report,’ *ADAJ* 31 (1987), 247-266; ‘A Fatimid Residence in Aqaba, Jordan,’ *ADAJ* 32 (1988), 207-224; ‘Evidence of the Umayyad Period from the Aqaba Excavations,’ *The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham During the Umayyad Period* (M. A. Bakhit and R. Schick, eds.) (Amman, 1989), 2, 164-184 [hereafter, ‘Umayyads’]; ‘Coptic Glazed Ceramics from the Excavations at Aqaba, Jordan,’ *JARCE* 26 (1989), 167-182; ‘Mahesh Ware: Evidence of early Abbasid occupation from southern Jordan,’ *ADAJ* 33 (1989), 269-285; ‘Glazed Ceramics of the Abbasid Period from the Aqaba Excavations,’ *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 55 (1990-91),

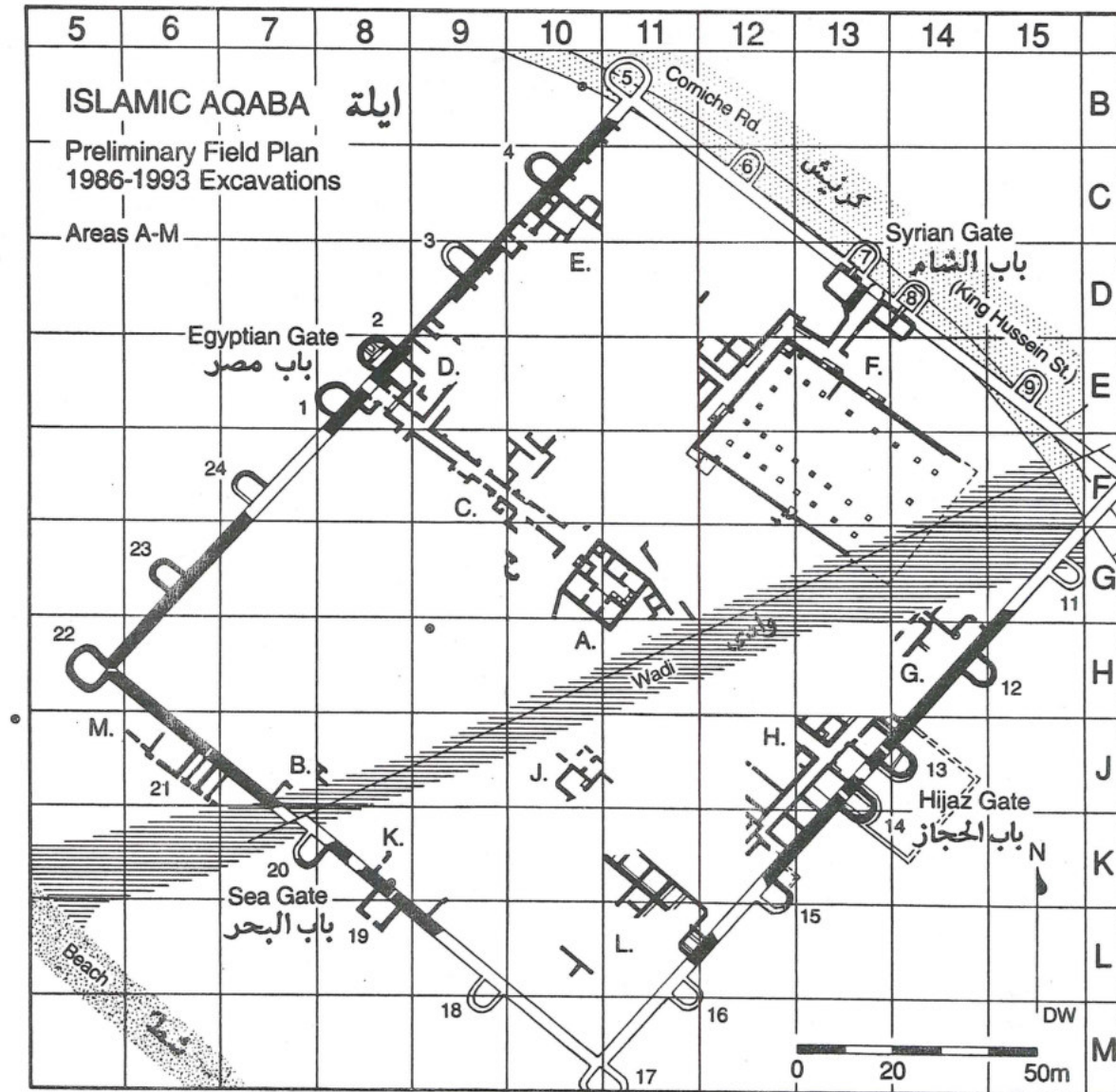
43-65; ‘The Fourth Gate at Ayla: A Report on the 1992 Excavations at Aqaba,’ *ADAJ* 37 (1993), 533-547; and A. Melkawi, K. ‘Amr and D. Whitcomb, ‘The Excavation of Two Seventh Century Pottery Kilns at Aqaba,’ *ADAJ* 38 (1994), 447-468.

¹¹ Deep soundings give stratigraphic evidence of the historical sequence from the mid-seventh century to the arrival of the Crusaders, a period of 450 years. The location of the congregational mosque was discovered in 1993, the structure formerly labeled the Large Enclosure. This mosque encroached over the axial Syrian street in early Abbasid times; the configuration of the earlier mosque remains to be determined.

¹² This hypothesis has appeared in a review by E. A. Knauf and C. H. Brooker in *ZDPV* 104 (1988), 179-181. Evidence against this interpretation may be found in Whitcomb, ‘Umayyads’ and a detailed response in *ZDPV* 106 (1990), 156-161. The location of the legionary camp remains problematic. The presence of Roman and Byzantine sherds suggest the camp should be nearby. It is worth noting that the pre-Islamic site consists of flat ground with very few sherds, just like the site of the present excavations before work began in 1986. The current excavations have revealed city walls, now cleared over 4m deep and 2m wide, which had left *absolutely no trace on the surface*. This problem may soon be resolved with the excavations of S. Thomas Parker in West ‘Aqaba.

¹³ S. T. Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier* (Winnona Lake, 1986).

¹⁴ A. C. Killick, *Udhrūh, Caravan City and Desert Oasis* (Romsey, 1987).



1. Plan of al-'Aqaba, resulting from 1986-1993 excavations.

To these examples might be added the camps at Luxor and Babylon in Egypt¹⁵ and at Pelusium in north Sinai.¹⁶ The elements for comparison are the rectangular form and the presence of four gates, U-shaped towers, and a central structure (tetrapylon). Proportions of these rectangular complexes are very close, but the overall size of the structure at al-'Aqaba is much smaller than that of the Roman forts (see FIG. 2). Parker notes the area of al-Lajjūn at 4.6 ha. and Udhrūḥ at 4.7 (Luxor may have been roughly the same); the walls of Ayla enclose a space of less than 2.5 ha, making this exceptionally small as a camp.¹⁷

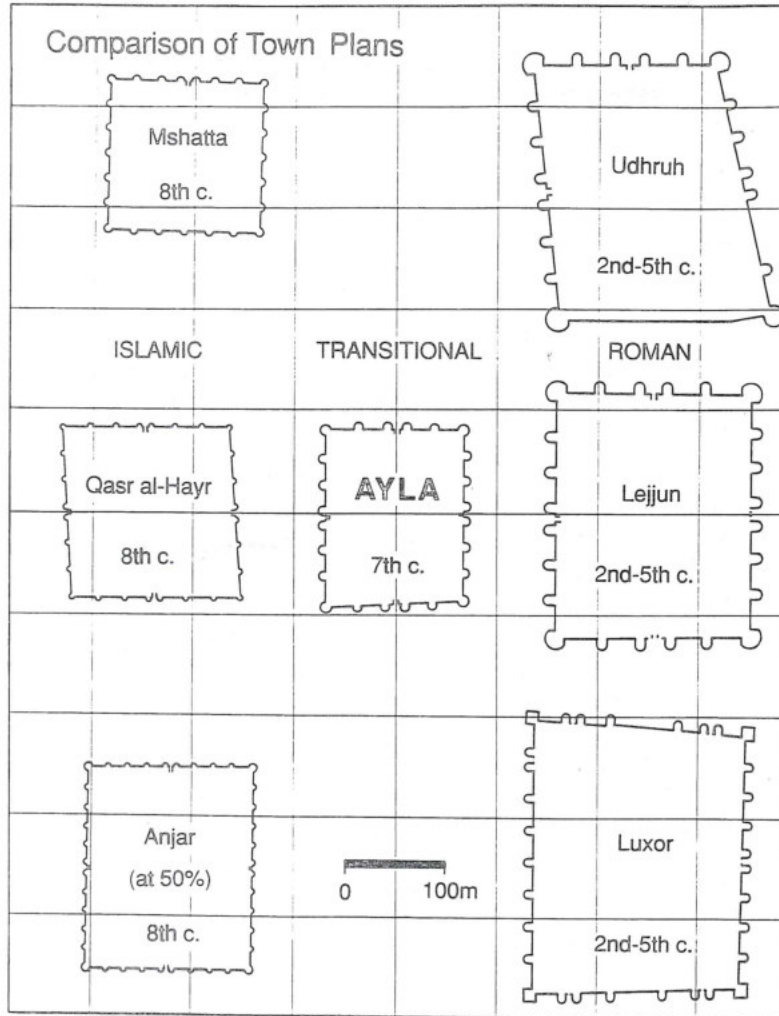
¹⁵ M. el-Saghir et al., *Le camp romain de Louqsour* (Cairo, 1986).

¹⁶ M. Abd el-Maqsoūd, 'Excavations at Tell el-Farama (Pelusium),' *ASAE* 70

(1984-1985), 3-8.

The very deep, U-shaped towers, apparently typical of the four Diocletianic camps described, are markedly different from the Ayla towers; these latter towers are much closer to those of early Islamic sites illustrated in FIG. 2. The only point of comparison between the towers at al-'Aqaba and the Roman towers is the open interior, which differs from the solid construction typical of the early Islamic "desert castles." Finally, the central structure or "tetrapylon" at al-'Aqaba, though only partially known at this point, is apparently distinct from all other examples cited.

¹⁷ Parker, *op. cit.*, 63.



2. Comparison of Roman legionary camps (second-fifth centuries) and early Islamic sites (eighth century) to town plan of Ayla.

"Desert Castles" as Amṣār

The so-called early Islamic "desert castles," found most often in isolated circumstances, are composed of many elements: baths, reception halls, lodgings. While they usually have strong walls with gates and towers on the periphery, there is no specific evidence of a militaristic function.¹⁸ One might suggest that the walls and formal, peripheral elements composed definitional limits for the urban entity, rather like the towered walls used as the symbol for cities on early maps. One must also bear in mind that, whatever the function of these structural complexes, they are unlikely to have been loci of innovation but rather reflective of architectural developments within (or adjacent to) cities.¹⁹

The Large Enclosure at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī,

which forms one of the closest parallels to Ayla in external configuration (FIG. 3), is another example of an early Islamic urban foundation. This complex is described by Grabar as "a planned urban entity — essential units of a medieval Islamic city: mosque, sūq, bath and residential quarters;" and indeed, he identifies this site as the "madīna" of a lost inscription.²⁰ The enclosure had four gates, though two were sealed shut quite early, rather like the Ḥijāz gate at Ayla. The six *buyūt* of this structure seem a rather limited residential area for a city, unless this complex is for representatives of six groups (tribes or clans?). On analogy with the larger *amṣār* (see below), primary residential areas would be outside this structure, where Grabar did find extensive mud-brick ruins.²¹ The mosque and room identified as the *Dār al-*

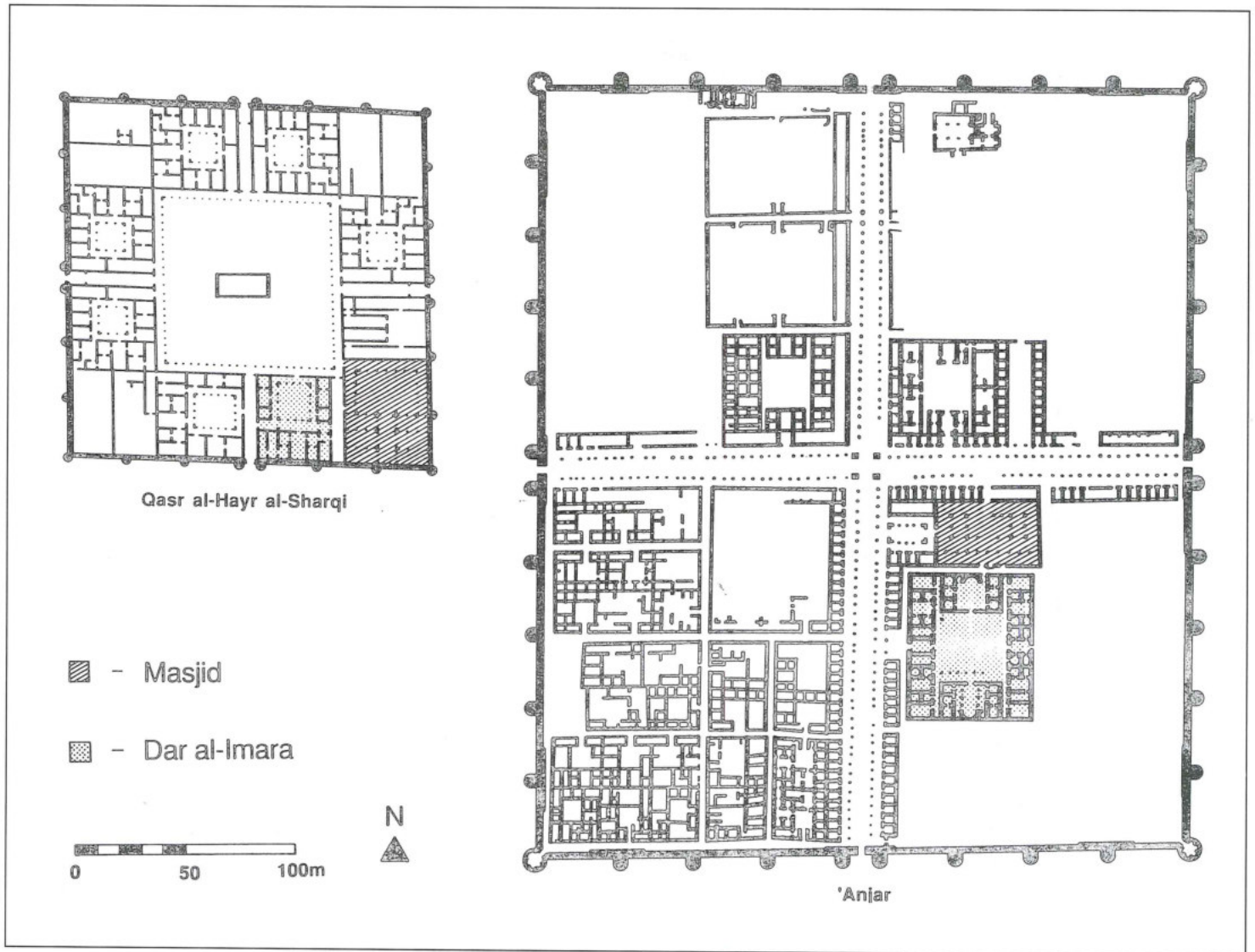
¹⁸ The defensive elements at Qaṣr al-Kharrāna have long been cited and are now convincingly disproved; see S. Urice, *Qaṣr Kharana in the Transjordan* (Durham, NC, 1987).

¹⁹ This view is contra that of Urice, *op. cit.*, and S. Helms, *Early Islamic Architecture of the Desert: A Bedouin Station in Eastern Jordan* (Edinburgh,

1990).

²⁰ O. Grabar *et al.*, *City in the Desert, Qaṣr al-Hayr East* (Cambridge, 1978), I, 40-89; see especially, 79-80. The plan on FIG. 3 is after his FIG. 23D.

²¹ Grabar, *op. cit.*, 106.



3. Plans of 'Anjar (after Chehab 1975) and Qaşr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī (large enclosure; after Grabar 1978, FIG. 23D).

Imāra are located in the southeast quadrant, as in the larger site of 'Anjar, suggesting that this section of urban sites in Bilād ash-Shām may have special significance.²² Clearly the original plan of the *mişr* of Ayla will fall between the examples of 'Anjar and Qaşr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī.

'Anjar and ar-Ramla as Islamic Settlements

As noted above, the original plan of Ayla seems to have formal aspects (walls, towers, and street plan) reminiscent of Byzantine urban forms. These structural details may have been taken from the neighboring Byzantine town or other settlements in the region (e.g., Udhrūḡ, al-Lajjūn). Another early Islamic foundation

clearly illustrates this principle. The city of 'Anjar ('Ayn al-Jarr) in southern Lebanon is securely dated to the Umayyad period. The size of 'Anjar is almost exactly twice the dimensions of Ayla, ca. 370 x 310m. The towered walls, axial streets, tetrapylon, and other details indicate a common architectural tradition with Ayla (see FIG. 3).²³ Beyond the elements of a Classical town, there is the mosque and Dār al-Imāra located in the southeast quadrant of the town. Whatever other details should emerge from these excavations, this site must stand as a prime testament to planned urban design in the early Islamic period.

Another city which should have special interest for the student of the early Islamic city is ar-Ramla, founded

²² This locational hypothesis was tested in Ayla during the short 1989 season of excavations; the results were inconclusive.

²³ For the unfortunately limited information on this important site, see H. Chehab, 'The Umayyad palace at 'Anjar,' *Ars Orientalis* 5 (1965), 17-27, and

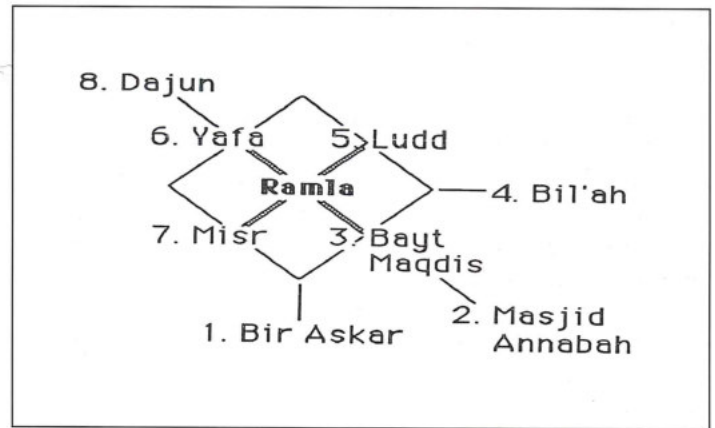
his 'Les palais omeyyades d'Anjar,' *Archaeologia* (1975), 18-25, as well as J. Sauvaget, 'Les ruines omeyyades de 'Andjar,' *Bull. Musée de Beyrouth* 3 (1939), 5-11. The plan on FIG. 3 is after Chehab's 1975 article.

by Sulaymān ibn 'Abd al-Malik before 717. This city was founded with the clear intention of serving as a new capital of Filisṭīn, administrative center of this important province. The city held a palace, mosque, "dyer's house" (*Dār aṣ-Ṣabbāghīn*) with a large tank in the center; an aqueduct fed a series of water reservoirs. Abū'l Fidā' mentions a palace built by 'Abd al-Malik before the town was founded, a report which may reflect the character of the original urban core (as remembered in the 13th century).

Al-Muqaddasī's report on ar-Ramla in the 10th century is most interesting: within an area of a square mile (ca. 2 x 2km) were numerous public buildings (caravanserais, baths, mosques), wide avenues, large markets, and residences constructed of dressed stone and fired brick. His description of the gates of ar-Ramla offers a key to the configuration of the eighth century city and later expansions.²⁴ The gates (numbered 1 to 8, FIG. 4) begin in the south and move counter-clockwise around the city to Miṣr (7) in the southwest. Dājūn (8) appears to be added as an afterthought. The Umayyad gates appear to be named for important destinations in four directions: Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem) in the southeast (3), Ludd (the pre-Islamic antecedent) in the northeast (5), Yāfā (the port of Jaffa) in the northwest (6), and Miṣr (Egypt) in southwest (7). This arrangement of gates strongly indicates that the original plan was a rectangle or square with axial streets meeting in the center (paralleling the arrangement found at 'Anjar and al-'Aqaba).

The remaining gates (1, 2, 4, 8) are more localized toponyms, suggesting an expansion of the 10th century city principally to the southeast (this is indeed the direction of the modern town; e.g., Survey of Western Palestine map XIII).²⁵

Excavations at ar-Ramla have been remarkably vague in site location; the clearest is the map published by Rosen-Ayalon. This shows her excavations in 1965 at Shikun Giora, where there was a pottery workshop on the "south-western margin of the city" and datable to the eighth and beginning of the ninth century. Northwest of this area is the White Mosque, presumably the congregational mosque of the town; excavations by Kaplan in 1949 and 1956 indicated an original Umayyad construction. Finally a remarkable series of eighth century mosaics was excavated by M. Brosch in 1973 to the southeast of this mosque and possibly associable with the *Dār al-*



4. Reconstruction of the ar-Ramla gates.

Imāra or other official building.²⁶ The spatial implication for the organization of the Umayyad city is that the White Mosque must have been in the southern quadrant and not the center of the city.²⁷

Amṣār such as Ayla, 'Anjar, and Qaṣr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī were settlements of a type intermediate between the theoretical camp and the metropolis; as structures comprising residential, religious and political functions, they may properly be designated as urban centers. The example of ar-Ramla, while not proven to have been orthogonal in design, adds another dimension to the *amṣār*. This is the transformation of the term to refer to capital cities, best exemplified in al-Muqaddasī's system. The largest and best known of the *amṣār*, al-Baṣra, al-Kūfa and al-Fuṣṭāṭ, have a direct relation with these smaller early Islamic cities. Each of these cities may be posited to have had orthogonal central elements, called the Ahl al-'Aliya, "Ahl al-Kūfa," and Ahl ar-Rāya respectively. Each urban center apparently had axial streets, residential areas (*qaṭā'i*) and a relatively open institutional center (containing the mosque and *Dār al-Imāra*). The plan of Ayla, and perhaps the "desert castles," may represent models of the urban core (orthogonal central elements) around which the larger city developed. The Ahl ar-Rāya at al-Fuṣṭāṭ is one such urban core (to be discussed below).²⁸

C. *Amṣār* and Arabian Cities

The second urban tradition, that of south Arabia, is non-orthogonal and its principals of organization are less well understood. Indeed, the very identification as urban has

²⁴ Al-Muqaddasī, *op. cit.*, 165.

²⁵ Names of the later gates were taken from the quarter (*darb*) suggesting that urban sprawl by the 10th century encapsulated some of the gates. Again modern toponyms allow a relative location of these gates: Masjid 'Annābah (the present village of 'Annābah) in the southeast, Bil'ah (Balah, associated with Abū Gawsh) in the east, and Dājūn (the village of Bayt Dajun) in the northwest. The remaining gate, Bir 'Askar, may be located approximately to the south; this follows from the order of al-Muqaddasī's list. This system parallels precisely the list of gates in early Islamic Shirāz, see D. Whitcomb, *Before the Roses and Nightingales: Excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Iran* (New York, 1985), 227.

²⁶ J. Kaplan, 'Excavations at the White Mosque in Ramla,' *Atiqot* 2 (1959), 106-115; M. Rosen-Ayalon and A. Eitan, *Ramla Excavations: Finds from the VIIIth century C. E.* (Jerusalem, 1969), and Rosen-Ayalon, 'The First Mosaic Discovered in Ramla,' *IEJ* 26 (1976), 104-119.

²⁷ D. Sourdel, 'La fondation umayyade d'al-Ramla,' *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Vorderen Orients: Festschrift für Bertold Spuler* (H. R. Roemer and A. Noth, eds.) (Leiden, 1981), 388-395.

²⁸ An earlier version of this paper makes a case for central urban cores at al-Baṣra (Ahl al-'Aliya) and at al-Kūfa.

often been questioned; there are many who would state that pre-Islamic Arabia had no cities or was at best in a proto-urban stage of development. The direct ramification of this attitude is that the *amṣār* have been characterized as primitive military camps, as “mass encampments, tent or makeshift settlements ... of bedouin migrants.”²⁹ The cultural denigration implied in these accounts is a dominant historical tradition, reflecting negative prejudices and clouding evaluation of subsequent developments.

One must begin with a definition of urbanism, a field of continuing scholastic discussion. The city (or town) as an archaeological artifact is a built form reflecting a distinctive social, political and economic organization. A definition used here is that “...the city is not merely an aggregation of population of critical size and density but also an organizing principle, an agent of regional integration ... a creator of effective space.”³⁰ Thus cities are nodes of interaction networks characterized by the institutional exchange of both information (encompassing administrative and ritual functions) and material goods (primary economic functions). These administrative, ceremonial and economic functions may have archaeological manifestations in architectural features indicating urban sites. Thus the presence of a *Dār al-Imāra*, congregational mosque, and *sūq* necessarily indicate urban functions relating the particular settlement to a regional system.

An urban style of life is more recognizable in the classically derived towns of north Syria than the settlements of western, and more particularly southwestern, Arabia.³¹ A delineation of archaeological features which may be taken as indicative of the Arabian urban type would require a detailed study in and of itself, far beyond what might be attempted in this paper. There now appears to be a growing corpus of archaeological evidence — unfortunately still very incomplete — which bears on this subject.

One may begin with the site of Umm al-Jimāl in northern Jordan as an example of an Arabian city. The status of this settlement as a town has not been ques-

tioned, nor does it derive from its classical antecedents. The most recent plan is, in the words of its excavator, a settlement of the sixth and seventh centuries (FIG. 5). The standing ruins of more than 150 buildings (within ca. 800m x 500m) are grouped into three irregular clusters.³² Knauf has pointed to the expansion of domestic architecture and claims these houses as typical of the Arabic *dār*.³³ The multiplication of small churches suggests a social fragmentation (clans?). The settlement was not enclosed within a defensive wall. The occupation of this town continued throughout the Umayyad period, though there is little explicit evidence published. One aspect of this early Islamic period appears to be the “deluxe refurbishing” of the praetorium; what appeared to be similar to a “desert castle” might be the urban administrative center (the *Dār al-Imāra*?).³⁴

A second archaeological example is the site of al-Mābiyāt, identified as the town of Qurḥ (or Wādi al-Qurā).³⁵ Al-Muqaddasi describes Qurḥ in the 10th century as the second largest city of al-Ḥijāz (after Makkā), “as well as the most flourishing and populous, the most abounding in merchants, commerce and wealth ... a Syrian, Egyptian, Iraqi, and Hijazite city all in one.”³⁶ Materials from the initial survey in 1968-69 strongly suggests an eighth century date, indicating an Umayyad foundation.³⁷ There are abundant connections with ceramics of Umayyad and early Abbasid (Mahesh wares) at al-‘Aqaba.³⁸ The plans published to date suggest an irregular structure, a defensive perimeter made up of adjacent house complexes (FIG. 6A).

The city of al-Madīna was the pivotal focus for Jazīrat al-‘Arab in the early Islamic period. While there have been interesting studies of the mosque of the Prophet in al-Madīna,³⁹ further archaeological work has been limited for obvious reasons. The pre-Islamic settlement of Yathrib has been taken as a type pattern for proto-urbanization in al-Ḥijāz. King has recently pondered, “Was there any town center [in pre-Islamic Yathrib]? Or was Yathrib a scatter of fortified farmsteads and hamlets

²⁹ I. M. Lapidus, ‘The Evolution of Muslim Urban Society,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (1973), 21-50. His discussion of early Islamic urbanization, here taken as typical of widespread assumptions, is found on pages 24-28.

³⁰ This discussion follows the position of P. Wheatley, *Nagara and Commandery: Origins of the Southeast Asian Urban Traditions* (Chicago, 1983), 7-8.

³¹ The question is whether an urban ideology as part of Islamic culture was part of the legacy of pre-Islamic Arabia or was formalized in the aftermath of the conquests. The position adopted here is that further research will confirm the former as the more dominant trait.

³² “The striking feature of the town plan is its disorder and lack of pre-conceived design ... Umm al-Jimal ... represents the indigenous way of life....” B. De Vries, *Umm el-Jimal, a tour guide* (Amman, 1982), 20.

³³ E. A. Knauf, ‘Umm al-Jimāl: An Arab town in late antiquity,’ *RB* 91 (1984), 579; he uses as his Arabian referent J. Wellhausen, ‘Medina vor dem Islam,’ *Skizzen und vorarbeiten* 6 (Berlin, 1889), 1-64, 4-6, 17-22. De Vries states that the completed plan of the city represents the occupation of the sixth through eighth centuries in ‘Research at Umm el-Jimal, Jordan,

1972-1977,’ *ADAJ* 26 (1982), 107, and his summary in ‘The Umm el-Jimal project, 1971-77,’ *BASOR* 244 (1981), 53-72.

³⁴ B. De Vries, ‘Urbanization in the Basalt Region of North Jordan in Late Antiquity: The Case of Umm el-Jimal,’ *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, II (Amman and London, 1985), 255.

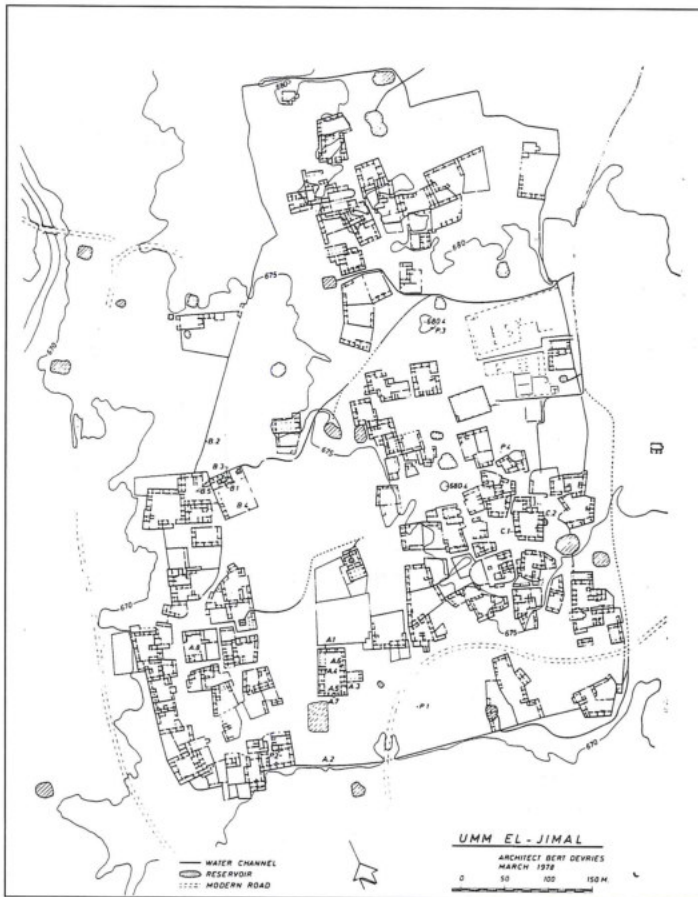
³⁵ A. A. Nasif, ‘The Identification of the Wādi ‘l-Qurā and the Ancient Islamic Site of al-Mibyāt,’ *Arabian Studies* 5 (1979), 1-19.

³⁶ Al-Muqaddasi, *op. cit.*, 83-84.

³⁷ This is based on close comparisons from Jordan (‘Ammān, Mt. Nebo) and Khirbat al-Mafjar, P. J. Parr *et al.*, ‘Preliminary Survey in N.W. Arabia, 1968,’ *BIA* 8-9 (1968-1969), 201. The excavations in 1984 revealed only a later 10th and 11th century occupation; M. Gilmore *et al.*, ‘A Preliminary Report on the First Season of Excavations at al-Mabiyat, an early Islamic site in the northern Hijaz,’ *Atlat* 9 (1985), 109-125, TABLE 4.

³⁸ D. Whitcomb, ‘Umayyads,’ ‘Mahesh,’ see note 10.

³⁹ J. Sauvaget, *La mosquée omeyyade de Medine* (Paris, 1947), and G. Bisheh, *The Mosque of the Prophet at Madinah Throughout the First-Century A.H. with Special Emphasis on the Umayyad Mosque* (Ann Arbor, 1979).



5. Plan of Umm al-Jimāl (after de Vries 1982, FIG. 9).

spread through the oasis” This idea is based on the existence of apparently early fortified towers (*ʿuṭum*, pl. *āṭām*) which reflected the clan-based social structure and potential for intra-communal conflict in these settlements.⁴⁰ It is interesting that the residence and mosque of the Prophet was empty land at the time of the hijra (and remained east of the center of the later town; see FIG. 6B). The town was not walled until A.D. 974.

The physical structure of al-Madīna may have a further significance. Bisheh notes that, “...in many cities the mosque and the administrative center, Dār al-Imāra, stood in a physical relationship which reproduced that of the

Prophet’s mosque and his private quarters in Madīnah.” Just as the mosques of the *amṣār* may have had a general prototype,⁴¹ the town plan of Madīnat an-Nabī may have influenced the search for ideas on Islamic urbanization.

The city of Najrān was an important urban center for southwestern Arabia spanning the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. The eastern part of the site is the walled citadel of Ukhdūd (with a pre-fourth century “South Arabian” date) which featured a prominent church (not yet securely identified). Occupation in the sixth and seventh centuries seems to show a gradual shift of location to the northwest.⁴² The plan of the ruins of Najrān exhibits the strangely irregular form (FIG. 6C), noted above at al-Mābiyāt and apparently typical of other southwestern Arabian towns.⁴³ It may be suggested that the eventual growth of town limits (and functionally a wall) grew out of the coalescence of individual structures. These buildings (or better, building complexes) may have been similar to the *āṭām* of al-Madīna. This pattern of isolated buildings, gradually infilled and transformed, may also be seen at the site of ar-Rabadha (c. 170km east of al-Madīna).⁴⁴ The transformation of settlement clusters into an urban entity has been advanced as a model for the process of early urbanism.⁴⁵ The hypothesis of a cluster pattern in Arabian urbanization may be a phenomenon which spread from South Arabia into al-Ḥijāz during the pre-Islamic period.

Mez has defined one of the urban traditions contributing to the early Islamic city as “the [south] Arabian city such as Ṣan‘ā’, to which type Mekka and Fuṣṭāṭ belonged.”⁴⁶ Amplification of this urban system will depend on study of the socio-cultural background; Dostal has proposed two urban types based on social organization. The first is called the Ṣan‘ā’-formation, developed from a market center and inhabited by groups of the same tribe with social differentiation based on his “farmer-craftsman” technological specializations. The second urban type is the Tarīm-formation, in which quarter organization reflects the social structure of a multi-tribal settlement (FIG. 6D).⁴⁷ This latter ethnographic type might have approximated the social organization, and hence the physical structure, of the *amṣār*.

⁴⁰ G. R. D. King, ‘Settlement in Western and Central Arabia and the Gulf in the 6th-8th Centuries A.D.’ Paper for the ‘Settlement Patterns in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East,’ an unpublished paper read at the Late Antiquity and Early Islam Workshop (London, 1991), 15-17. Two of the *āṭām*, believed to be pre-Islamic in date, are briefly described in A. Ansari, *Athar al-Madīna al-Munawwara* (Madīna, 1378), 43-53; see G. Bisheh, 81-82.

⁴¹ G. Bisheh, *op. cit.*, p. 154-155.

⁴² Survey and preliminary excavations have resulted in a ceramic typology, discussed but not presented in J. Zarins *et al.*, ‘Preliminary Report on the Najrān/Ukhdūd Survey and Excavations 1982/1402 AH,’ *Atlat* 7 (1983), 22-40.

⁴³ An impression of town plans may be gathered from air photographs published by P. M. Costa, ‘Aspetti dell’insediamento urbano antico nella penisola araba,’ *Studi in onore di Francesco Gabrieli nel suo ottantesimo compleanno* (R. Traini, ed.) (Rome, 1984), vol. 1, 253-260. The Islamic

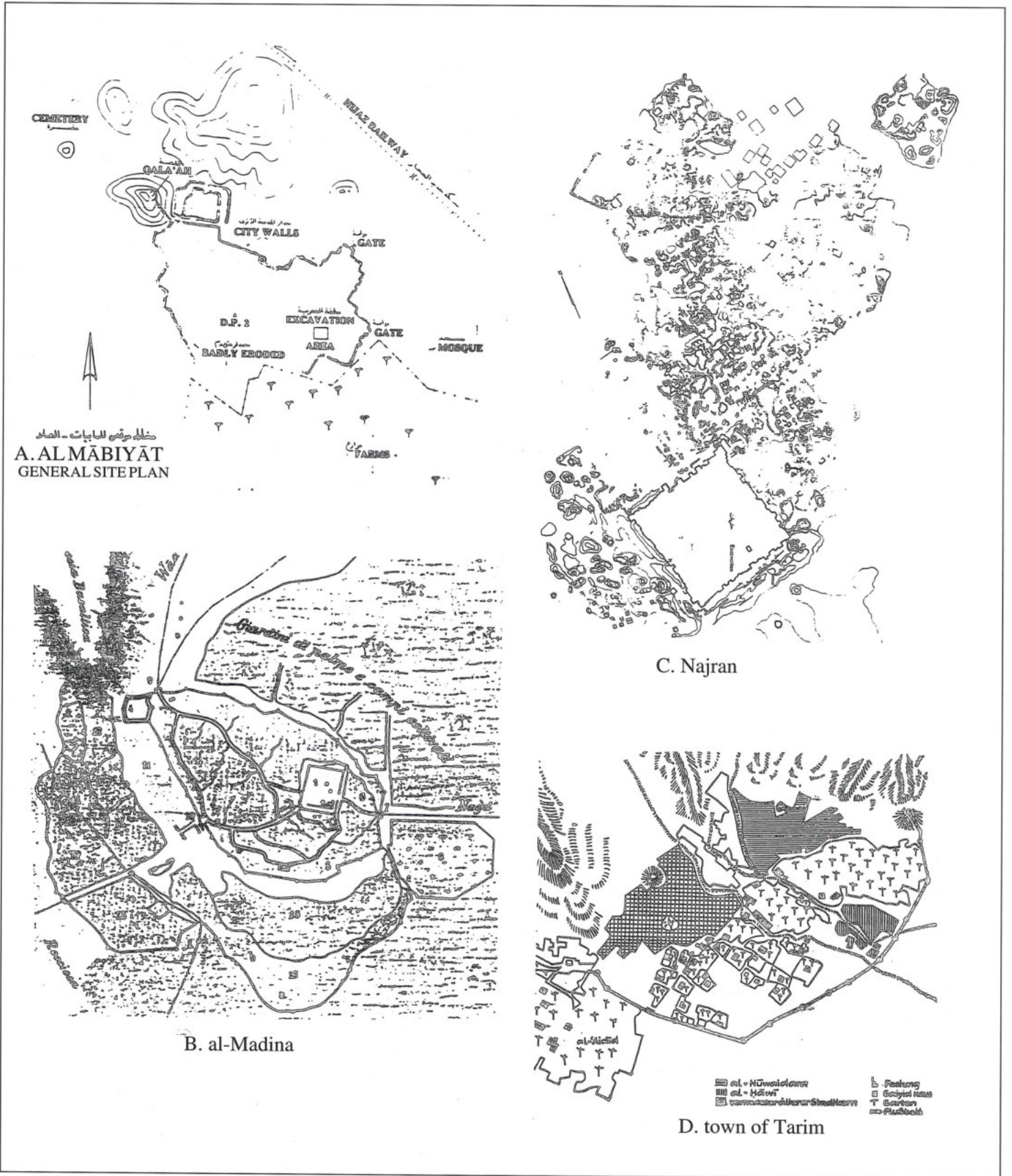
city of Baraqish seems particularly promising. One may expect further structural comparanda as such sites come to be excavated.

⁴⁴ S. A. al-Rashid, *al-Rabadha: Portrait of Early Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia* (Harlow, 1986).

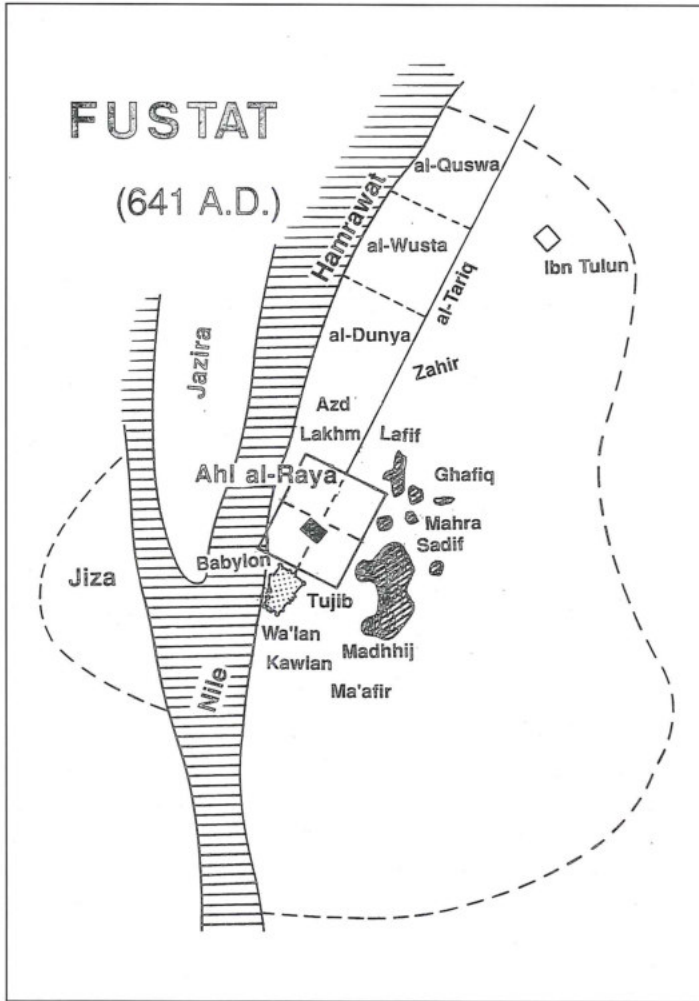
⁴⁵ A recent exploration of this cluster model is found in R. J. McIntosh, ‘Early Urban Clusters in China and Africa: The Arbitration of Social Ambiguity,’ *Journal of Field Archaeology* 18 (1991), 199-212, which relies heavily on the ideas in P. Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters* (Chicago, 1971).

⁴⁶ A. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg 1922), 389; this seminal idea is presented without documentation or further discussion.

⁴⁷ W. Dostal, ‘Towards a Model of Cultural Evolution in Arabia,’ *Studies in the History of Arabia*, vol. 2: *Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Riyadh, 1984), 188-189. See also his ‘Zum Problem der Stadt- und Hochkultur im vorderen Orient: Ethnologische Marginalien,’ *Anthropos* 63 (1968), 238-240.



6. A. Plan of al-Mābiyāt (after Gilmore 1985: PL. 97); B. Plan of al-Madīna (after L. C. Caetani, *Annali dell'Islam*, vol. 2 [Milan, 1907], opp. p. 71); C. Plan of Najrān (Ukhdūd; after Zarins *et al.* 1983: PL. 16); D. Plan of the modern town of Tarim in Ḥaḍramaut (after Dostal 1968: Abb. 3).



7. Reconstruction of al-Fuṣṭāṭ (based, in part, on Kubiak 1982: plan 1).

D. Al-Fuṣṭāṭ: An Arabian or Orthogonal City?

Al-Fuṣṭāṭ enables us to examine the hypothetical effects of the dual urban traditions on the most important of the *amṣār*.⁴⁸ Perhaps more than any other *miṣr*, the development of this capital has been discussed in terms of the *khiṭaṭ*. The methodology has resulted in the re-

construction of tribal settlements across the plain south of Cairo (al-Qāhira).⁴⁹ The settlement of al-Fuṣṭāṭ was placed next to the older Roman and Byzantine legionary fort of Babylon (or Qaṣr ash-Sham').⁵⁰ In the center of the city was the mosque of 'Amr and, to the northeast, the house of 'Amr (identical in original size).

These structures (or better, institutions) were located in the *khiṭa* of Ahl ar-Rāya, "the people of the banner;" this focus of the city (estimated at 400-500 men) was composed of prominent individuals from a variety of tribes.⁵¹ According to Kubiak, the "larger clans..., in addition to what they held within the Ahl al-Rāya, were given parcels for settlement in other parts of the site."⁵² It follows that the lists of *khiṭaṭ* which have been recorded for al-Fuṣṭāṭ may represent a conflation of both "types" of *khiṭaṭ*, those within the urban center (inside the Ahl ar-Rāya) and those dispersed across the plain (the suburban *khiṭaṭ*).

What was the Ahl ar-Rāya? One may reasonably suggest a planned urban center of square or rectangular shape, taking its orientation from the original mosque of 'Amr (see below). Such a plan challenges the prevalent assumption that, as expressed most recently by Kubiak, "...it would have been unimaginable to set up an Arab camp-city on the regular lines of a typical Roman camp or garrison-town, with straight streets and a checkerboard pattern..."⁵³ Certainly the archaeological investigations at al-Fuṣṭāṭ tend to confirm Kubiak's impression, an urban plan with a marked neglect for the right angle.⁵⁴ While early Islamic artifacts have been found, the excavations have not demonstrated pre-Tulunid occupation in the areas investigated.⁵⁵ However, an examination of the distribution of published excavations indicates a distance from the mosque of 'Amr and the fort of Babylon (see FIG. 7; hatched areas are excavations). In other words, no excavations have been undertaken inside the Ahl ar-Rāya.

The mosque of al-Fuṣṭāṭ has been subjected to constant rebuildings; it is likely that the orientation of the city plan was taken from the earliest *qibla*, that of the

⁴⁸ An earlier version of this paper, presented to the Late Antiquity and Early Islam Workshop, London 1991, also considered details for an orthogonal hypothesis derived from data on al-Baṣra and al-Kūfa. This evidence, while of fundamental importance, is omitted here.

⁴⁹ Notable examples of such studies are: P. Casanova, *Essai de reconstitution topographique de la ville d'al Foustat ou Misr* (Cairo, 1913-19); A. R. Guest, 'The Foundation of Fustat and the Khittahs of the Town,' *JRAS* 1907, 49-83; and now, W. B. Kubiak, *Al-Fustat: Its Foundation and Early Urban Development* (Warsaw, 1982; Cairo, 1987). For an alternative view of *khiṭaṭ*, see J. Akbar, 'Khata and the Territorial Structure of Early Muslim Towns,' *Muqarnas* 6 (1989), 22-32.

⁵⁰ The legionary fort of Babylon has been mentioned above. Kubiak's discussion, *op. cit.*, is based on A. J. Butler, *The Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt* (Oxford, 1884), 155-181.

⁵¹ The Ahl ar-Rāya is often compared to the *khiṭaṭ*, al-Lafif and the Zahir as non-tribal groupings; these *khiṭaṭ*, may have been spaced at intervals along at-Tariq avenue.

⁵² Kubiak, *op. cit.*, 62.

⁵³ Kubiak, *op. cit.*, 65. He continues, "Notwithstanding diverse cultural traditions and some experience with town life, it is improbable that at this early date the Arabs founding al-Fustat had any clear idea of town planning or understood it in a precise, preconceived way, as the Romans had."

⁵⁴ The published excavations fall into two campaigns: that of Aly Bahgat and A. Gabriel and that of Scanlon and Kubiak, the latter of which lasted over 14 years and is just now reaching final publication.

⁵⁵ This interpretation counters that published by Scanlon and Kubiak in various places, perhaps most specifically in T. Bianquis, G. T. Scanlon and A. Watson 'Numismatics and the Dating of Early Islamic Pottery in Egypt,' *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*. (D. K. Kouymjian, ed.) (Beirut, 1974), 163-173. This article claims to depart from "architectural stylistics" for dating purposes but presents limited situations with serious ambiguities (cf. walls and sections on PL. 2). The addition of numismatic evidence does not relieve the methodological flaw which may be characterized as a tyranny of "ceramic stylistics." One must also note that such methodological criticisms are easy in view of the exceptionally difficult archaeological problems inherent in this site.

Şahāba.⁵⁶ Near the mosque should be the *Dār al-Imāra*, for which there is no direct evidence.⁵⁷ Al-Fuṣṭāṭ was situated next to the fortress of Babylon and an older town, possibly identified as Tandunias. Opinion has been divided whether this town was identical to the Byzantine fortress and ar-Rasad to the immediate south or may be identified as Umm Dunayn to the north near al-Maqs. It is also possible that the name of Tandunias may be associated with Ḥamrā' ad-Dunyā.⁵⁸ If the late Byzantine town lay in the Ḥamrāwāt to the north, then one may explain the otherwise surprising continued existence of Babylon (Qaşr ash-Sham') within al-Fuṣṭāṭ: it may be suggested that this Byzantine fortress, in the southern part of the Ahl ar-Rāya, adopted the functions of the *Dār al-Imāra*.

With the mosque of 'Amr in the center and the Qaşr ash-Sham' (*Dār al-Imāra*) on the south edge, one may draw a maximal rectangle 740 x 620m (twice the size of 'Anjar) to represent the institutional center of al-Fuṣṭāṭ (FIG. 7), which encompasses the *qaṭā'* of the Ahl ar-Rāya.⁵⁹ Within this urban center were settled elements of various tribes, on analogy with al-Kūfa: Azd, Lakhm, Lafif, Ghafiq on the north; Mahra, Şadif, Tujib, Madhhij on the East; and Wa'lān, Kawlān, Ma'afir on the south. North of the Ahl ar-Rāya stretched the axial street, known as aṭ-Ṭariq, past the three Ḥamrāwāt.

Each of the tribes settled in the Ahl ar-Rāya also held *khiṭaṭ* farther away from the river; these *khiṭaṭ* (possibly including the Ḥamrāwāt) formed the Arabian element of the *mişr* of al-Fuṣṭāṭ. Later descriptions of al-Fuṣṭāṭ Cairo suggest other characteristics which may reflect on the early *mişr*. Specifically, this will be in the great houses of the town, which rose some seven stories and made the city appear to be a mountain from a distance. These high residential blocks sound most similar to the *āṭām* of Arabia, placed apparently without reference to cardinal points and not enclosed in a city wall. Finally, the open spaces separating these residential clusters may also have been an Arabian urban feature. Thus, in what must be only a preliminary hypothesis, the *khiṭaṭ* organized around the urban core (the Ahl ar-Rāya) was a city built in the Arabian tradition. Further, the evolution of the ear-

ly Islamic city is the conjunction of these two traditions into an urban entity, one which reflected the social and cultural needs of the new Islamic community.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of the *amşār* may be seen as a new phase in the urbanization, or more precisely, the urban process in the history of the Middle East. Wheatley has proposed that such developmental process is of two types, urban imposition or urban generation.⁶⁰ "Urban imposition ... is virtually inseparable from the expansion of empire and is usually accompanied by the establishment of an administrative organization designed to sustain the value system of the colonial power" The position adopted in this paper, that the *amşār* represent a program of urban imposition, implies that early Islamic culture intentionally reconstituted the social organization of the conquered lands. This view presupposes the existence of institutional components of fully urbanized society in pre-Islamic western Arabia.

On the other hand, these cities may be seen as a "generational process" in which cultural traits of the fully urbanized milieu of the Middle East were integrated into a distinctive Islamic urbanism. In other words, one might see the *amşār* as an imposed form but the internal structure of these new settlements, both social and physical, to be component traits adopted from existing cities. The orthogonal urban core may be viewed as a mechanism for facilitating this interaction.

The phenomenon of the *amşār*, while rooted in the camps of the Arab conquest and reflecting a militaristic nature, actually describes the great wave of urban foundations which became a major characteristic of early Islamic culture.⁶¹ The hypothesis which best explains the structures and associated materials found in the current excavations at al-'Aqaba is that the Islamic city of Ayla was founded as a *mişr* under 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān. The *mişr* was designed on the model of legionary forts, for which al-Lajjūn, Udhrūḡ, and (the still to be discovered) Ailana provided ready examples.⁶² It follows from the evidence of Ayla and the early Islamic "desert castles" that early Islamic urban foundations were planned or-

⁵⁶ The accompanying plan uses this original orientation, the "qibla of the şahāba" or 117° SE. The mosque of 'Amr shows two wall alignments of two later qibla, the "qibla of the astronomers" (127° SE) and that of the Ibn Tulūn mosque (141° SE). For a study of qibla in Cairo, see David A. King, 'Architecture and Astronomy: The Ventilators of Medieval Cairo and their Secrets,' *JAOS* 104 (1984), 97-133. It is interesting that the orientation of 127° southeast is the orientation of Ayla.

⁵⁷ The house of 'Amr, immediately to the north of the mosque, may have been a first *Dār al-Imāra*; on the other hand, when Qurra ibn Sharrik changed the qibla in 710, his enlarged mosque encroached on the house of 'Amr and he compensated the descendants of 'Amr. One must conclude that, at that time, the *Dār al-Imāra* or governor's residence was elsewhere; on the apparent lack of a *Dār al-Imāra* at al-Fuṣṭāṭ, see Kubiak, *op. cit.*, 129.

⁵⁸ See Kubiak, *op. cit.*, 57, 119. The term Ḥamrāwāt apparently referred to the quarters inhabited by non-Arabs ("red" = white skinned, specifically

Greeks and Persians); this was an ethnically composite population, with whole bodies of non-Arab *mawāllit.*, Banū al-Azraq, Banū Yanna (Syro-Byzantines), Banū Rūbil (Jews?). At least 13 churches and one monastery were located in the Ḥamrāwāt

⁵⁹ This square plan is less than completely satisfactory in that about a third of the area would have been in the Nile. The location of al-Jiza at the southwest corner of the square is no doubt coincidental.

⁶⁰ Wheatley, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁶¹ This is exceptionally well stated in E. Reitmeyer, *Die Städtegrundungen der Araber im Islam nach den arabischen Historikern und Geographen* (Munich, 1912).

⁶² As mentioned in n. 12, this site of Ailana or Aila promises an imminent epiphany.

thogonal structures. The larger and more complex of the *amṣār* combined this urban core with the tradition of the Arabian city, as yet to be fully defined. It must be emphasized that both elements are basic to the new tradition of urbanization from early Islamic times; the chimera of "the Islamic city" needs to recognize this mode of organization, in this and other Islamic periods, rather than concentrating on much later devolution.⁶³ In the words of Hugh Kennedy,

Early Muslim society did not deliberately choose to develop towns with narrow winding streets out of any conscious aesthetic or cultural preference, and the idea that there is something in the spirit of Islam which leads to the enclosed, private and secret world of the 'Islamic city' should not be entertained by serious urban historians. The most important evidence for this comes from early Islamic planned towns.⁶⁴

The city is more than just a collection of buildings within massive walls; it is rather a focus of social institutions made viable through an economic system. The development of the Islamic city would continue through the first centuries of Islam and the fruition should not be sought before the ninth and 10th centuries in the great capitals of the Eastern Caliphate. Nevertheless, city founda-

tion had a strong symbolic value in Islam from the beginning, that of *hijra* or settlement (as opposed to wandering) and of cultural claim on new territory.⁶⁵ This subject goes far beyond the scope of this paper but clearly indicates the central concern of urbanization to the development of Islamic culture.

Addendum

The success, growth, and integration of these smaller *amṣār* into larger cities has left most of these foundations not immediately identifiable. The phenomenon of the "desert castles" must be viewed as a result of preservation (due to remote location) and, in part, a by-product of patterns of archaeological research. The discovery of Ayla was in great part serendipity; nevertheless, the delineation of the site was the direct result of a detailed hypothesis of its plan. There are numerous Islamic sites which would benefit from study based on hypotheses taking them as planned *amṣār* (hypotheses hopefully more developed than the outlines suggested here). Perhaps most significantly, progress in research on early Islamic urbanization is dependent on archaeological research, both new work in the field and re analysis of published resources.

⁶³ An example of this tendency is the article of J. L. Abu-Lughod (n. 1).

⁶⁴ H. Kennedy, 'From *Polis* to *Madina*: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria,' *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 16.

⁶⁵ "The *khīṭat*, of Kufa were ...primarily intended for those who had come from further away. 'Umar's notion was that Kufa should be *dār hijra* for the Muslims, and these settlers were the *muhajirin* of Kufa. Their hetero-

geneous composition led 'Umar to hope that his Islamic experiment would meet with success among them, ... the fellowship of *hijra* forming the accepted basis of society." M. Hinds, 'Kufan Political Alignments and their Background in the Mid-Seventh Century A.D.,' *IJMES* 2 (1971), 351; cf. the comments on *hijra* by R. B. Serjeant in *San'a', an Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), 43.