

## Damascus and the Umayyad Empire

### The Umayyad Empire, its Capital Damascus and the “Desert Castles”

Following the death of the prophet Muhammad, the first four of his successors to lead the Muslim community—known in Islamic history as the “rightly guided caliphs” (*al-khulafa al-rashidun*)—were elected. However, in 39 A.H. / 661 C.E., Mu’awiya ibn Abi Sufiyan, the governor of Syria, declared himself leader of the young Muslim empire and eventually passed his rule to his son Yazid without much community consultation. This hereditary transmission of power was unprecedented: the first dynasty of Islamic history—known as the Umayyads (39–132 A.H. / 661–750 C.E.)—was born! And this, as the great historian Ibn Khaldun (732–783 A.H. / 1332–1382 C.E.) was to report centuries later, was not the only innovation: “The first to use the throne in Islam was Mu’awiya. He asked the people for permission to use one, saying that he had become corpulent. So they permitted him to use one, and he did. His example was followed by (all the later) Muslim rulers.” The throne Ibn Khaldun refers to was located in the ancient city of Damascus, the new political centre of the empire.

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Fig. 1: Jerusalem (Israel/Palestine), the Dome of the Rock (71. A.H. / 691 C.E.), the oldest largely unchanged building of Islamic history.  
Photo: Weber 2012.

Fig. 2: Damascus (Syria), the Umayyad Mosque (87–96 A.H. / 706–715 C.E.), the oldest largely unchanged mosque.  
Photo: Weber 1997.





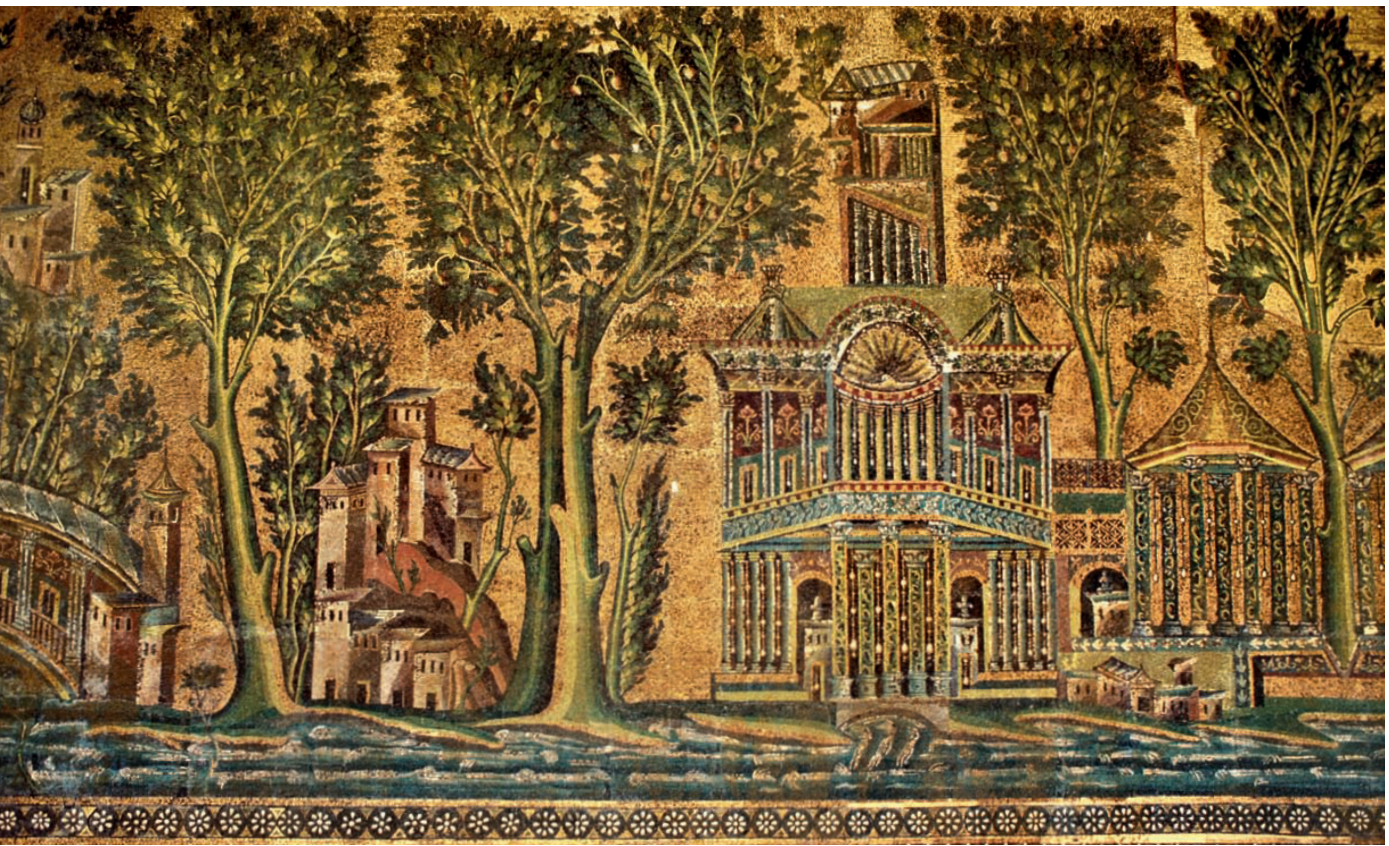


Fig. 3: Damascus (Syria), a section of the mosaics in the arcades of the Umayyad Mosque (87–96 A.H. / 706–715 C.E.). Photo: Roumi 1998.

The Umayyads remained in power for only a brief 90 years, but nevertheless they set the course for important cultural developments later on. With the conquest of Spain in the West and Central Asia and parts of India in the East, the empire achieved its greatest extent, and Islam became a world religion. Arabic as the language of the Qur'an became the binding element between the distant parts of the empire, particularly after it was adopted as the official language of government under caliph Abd al-Malik (65–84 A.H. / 685–704 C.E.) with the aim of speeding up the process of centralisation, Islamisation and Arabisation. Perhaps the most powerful visual marker of Abd al-Malik's ideological vision is the so-called Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, erected during his reign and to this day one of the most important architectural and indeed religiously central monuments of the Islamic world (Fig. 1).

However, Damascus and not Jerusalem was chosen as capital, probably because of its abundance of fresh water and large garden areas, fed by the river Barada. Many ancient channels provided almost all houses of the city with fresh water, and consequently it is not surprising that excavations in the area once occupied by Mu'awiya's palace brought to light a dense network of pipes and water channels. Mu'awiya had chosen to build his palace directly at the southern walls of the old Roman temple which in his time housed the Christian Cathedral of St. John in its courtyard. Initially, Muslims and Christians continued to use this ancient place of worship together, but under caliph al-Walid I (85–96 A.H. / 705–715 C.E.), the old structures inside the temple walls were torn down in 87 A.H. / 706 C.E. to build what is today the oldest largely unchanged mosque of the Muslim world (Fig. 2). The architects of al-Walid adorned the new mosque building with marvellous marble cladding and green and golden glass mosaics (Fig. 3). These, designed and executed



by Byzantine craftsmen, show the most splendid garden landscapes spread across extensive areas. The exact symbolism of the landscapes, with their rivers and idealised architectural features, is still much discussed today. Do they represent Paradise, the fertility of Umayyad rule or simply—as many people of the city claim—the green river banks of Damascus?

The Umayyads are known for their numerous palaces built all over their greater Syrian realm—well away from the hussle and bussle of city life. The exact function of these so-called desert castles remains unknown. They might have been used by the caliph or members of his court to serve as meeting places with local leaders, hunting lodges, baths, bases for caravans, or centres of agricultural estates. Today, we have evidence of both: entire settlements like in Anjar (Fig. 4) or Jabal Says (Fig. 5) and smaller compounds—like in Qusayr Amra—where the bathhouse seems to have been the most important building. Different settings may have combined different functions. Meanwhile, the early Islamic redevelopment of the region after centuries of war also led to investment in agricultural and commercial structures, like those found at Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (Fig. 6). Today, we have evidence of dozens of desert castles, but none looks quite like the other in terms of architecture and architectural decoration. Indeed, it seems that craftsmen (and with them

Fig. 4: Anjar (Lebanon), main-street of the Umayyad city founded by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.H. / early 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Photo: Weber 1995.

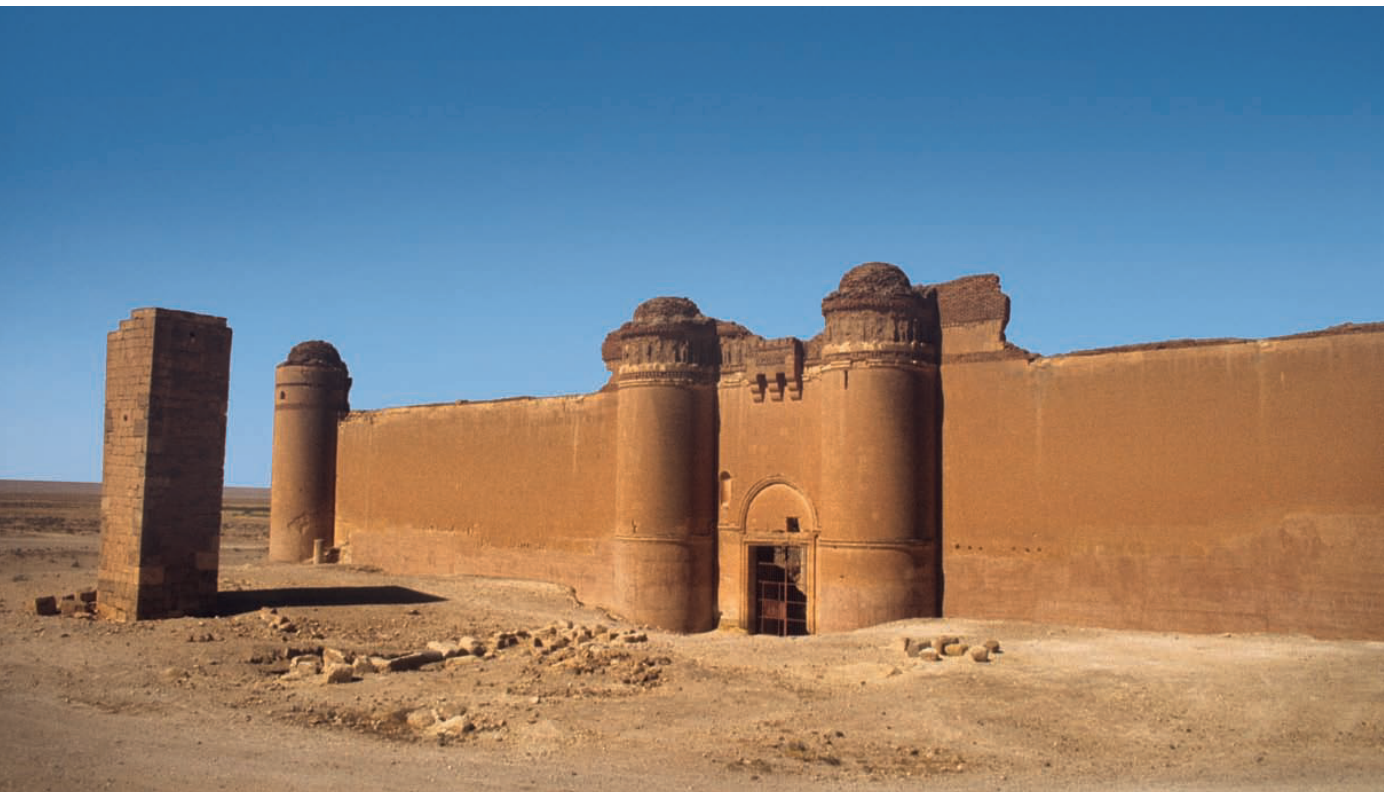
Fig. 5: Jabal Says (Syria), remains of the main castle and one of the many structures built under Umayyad rule during the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.H. / first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.  
Photo: Weber 1997.



Fig. 6: Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi (Syria), built by the Umayyad caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik in 110 A.H. / 728–29 C.E.  
Photo: Weber 1994.

styles, techniques and plans) came to the Syrian region from all over. Subsequently, Mesopotamian and Iranian influences were combined with Coptic, Anatolian and Byzantine elements in a variety of ways to create each building's distinct architectural and decorative appearance. A lot of stylistic experimentation prevailed as the architecture and art commissioned by the new central power first adopted and then adapted ancient legacies. At this point, a uniform imperial style did not yet exist.

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## Salver with Architectural Decor

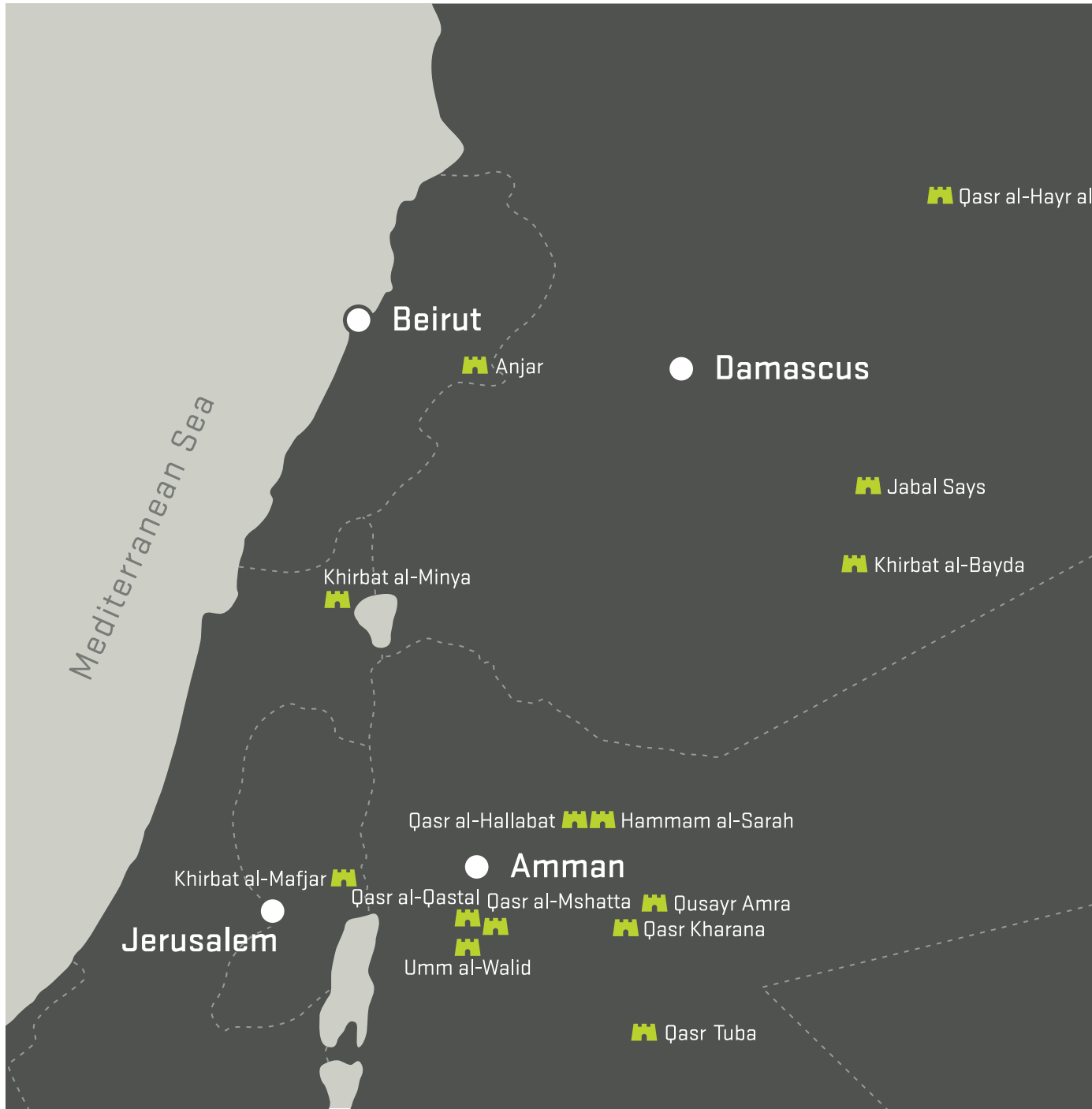
Brass, Syria, Jordan or Iran,  
probably 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> century A.H. / 7<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> century C.E.  
Dia: 64.5 cm  
ISL-SMB, Inv.-No. I. 5624. Photo: Petra Stüning.

This richly ornamented tray raises many questions. The centre is marked by a domed building with blended arcades in the upper floor, and a kind of column appearing in the middle of the building. A double wing of Persian origin marks the building as of outstanding significance. The floral decor and the radial architectural arcades are also of Iranian origin, and the building was often interpreted as a temple. However, one finds the same vegetal elements in the Dome of the Rock; the redirection of the hajj to Jerusalem was probably one reason for its building in 72 A.H. / 691–692 C.E. Coins of that year show a column similar to the one found in this tray. In early Islamic practice, interestingly, the qibla was often marked by stones or a lance in the ground. Is the column a symbol of Jerusalem as the first *qibla* and is the building depicted here the Dome of the Rock?

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 Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi

-Gharbi

## Location of Main Umayyad Castles



City



Umayyad Castle



Present international boundary



0 50 km

