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The Pattern of Medieval Urbanism in the Arab World

G. HAMDAN

THE MIDDLE AGES, especially in the earlier phases between the seventh and the tenth centuries are of paramount importance in the history of urbanism in the Arab world. The area, which had been the cradle of ancient urbanism,¹ had become of no especial importance in the urban life of classical times. With the advent of Islam, however, it emerged once again as an area in which towns flourished. While urbanism experienced its "dark ages" in Europe, this was the "golden age" of town life and of the culture of cities in the Arab world. The sweeping generalization that the Middle Ages are the "dark ages" of urbanism in the world² is only a half-truth. In the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, the role of the Arabs in the urban field was not confined to the rehabilitation and regeneration of the old Roman towns; they also extended urbanism by founding new towns and brought urban areas to sizes probably never reached before.

Yet the Middle Ages mark the last time when the Arab East led the world in urbanization. Ever since, East has increasingly lagged behind West, until at present the chasm is at its widest. Furthermore, this was the period of urban divergence between East and West, when each began to follow an entirely different evolutionary line. It is such an important "water-shed" that the present-day regional differentiation between the two worlds in the pattern and typology of urbanism cannot be fully understood without reference to it. If the role of the Middle Ages in the weave of the contemporary urban mesh in Europe is vital, it is even more so in the case of the Arab world. This is because of the dominant importance of the industrial revolution upon the structure of the modern European town in contrast to its very late and incomparably modest impact upon the Arab town. Islamic religion has stamped the cities and towns of the East with characteristics which impart to them their regional personality; it virtually distinguishes the culture-area to which they belong.³

In view of the importance of this period, it is surprising that, apart from a valuable résumé by East,⁴ it has been neglected by students of historical and urban geography. Nothing exists to parallel the intensive studies of European medieval urbanism such as those of

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Lavedan⁵ or of Dickinson.⁶ The aim of the present paper is to give an outline of the development of town-life in Arab lands in medieval times. It is essential to emphasize that the real urban drive under the Arabs lasted only for their first two or three centuries, that is, from the seventh to the ninth century. The remaining and greater part of the Middle Ages was decidedly one of decadence and de-urbanization. It is, however, neither possible nor desirable to delimit a hard-and-fast chronological divide.

Factors influencing development

Five main factors—religious, military, political, commercial and social—influenced the development of towns by the Arabs. As the precepts of Islam urge a life of close association, it is evident that its obligations may be best discharged in a collective, preferably urban society.⁷ Dispersion is deprecated because it makes for laxity and heterodox deviations. It is significant that *al-guma'a* (Friday prayer) is a derivative of, and meant for association and agglomeration. Medina (the city) is both a proper and a generic name.⁸ Characteristically, the new Moslem town started with the mosque. As George says: "... l'Islam a été aussi un bâtisseur de villes".⁹ Indeed, Deffontaines argues that as an urbanizing force Islam outweighs Christianity, important as the latter was as a city-founder.¹⁰ The case of Islam undoubtedly supports the generalization that all phases of outstanding urban activity coincide with phases of religious efflorescence. Of the major religious cities created by Islam mention may be made of Najaf, Karbela, Mahdiyya, Fez, Marrakesh, Ujda and Rabat. The last is the most renowned of a whole series of *ribats*—strongholds of the zealous order of *marabouts* who founded the Almoravide rule in northwest Africa.¹¹

The military factor was important because of the need to found fortresses in order to command the invaded countries. Basra and Kufa in Irak, Fustat in Egypt and Kairawan in Tunisia are examples of this. They all have in common a position on the edge of the desert,¹² the homeland of the Arabs.

The influence of the political factor is exceptionally well developed, thanks to a prevailing Arab tradition whereby every ruler and ruling dynasty, because of tribal rivalries at home, used to abandon the capital city of its predecessors and establish itself in a newly founded city of its own.¹³ This made for the multiplication of towns; for example, the successive shifts from Fustat to Katai to Al-'Askar (the barracks) to Cairo. This, however, imparted an element of instability and transience to the structure of such centres. The political factor was also responsible for the early appearance of "court cities". Samarra in Irak and Meknes (later described as "the Versailles of Morocco") antedate the *Residenzstädte* of Karlsruhe, Potsdam and Versailles by some ten centuries.

Commerce was vital to urban life in the Arab world. With the widening perimeter of the *oikoumene*, the inherent character of this area began to crystallize as a zone of junction between the monsoon and the temperate lands. This bridge-area fulfilled the function of a corridor between the Asiatic storehouse on the one side and the European market on the other. The traders of the Middle East became the middlemen of the medieval world. So pervasive was this intermediary role that the word Arab came in some languages simply to mean a merchant.¹⁴ Perforce, all commercial activity was concentrated in cities and urban centres—in an outer-ring of sea-ports on the one hand and in an inner and linked ring of desert-ports on the other. The fact that in the Old World there was a chain of urban centres extending from Hither Asia to the North Sea (including the so-called “medieval economic backbone of Europe”) is eloquent testimony to the immense value of transit commerce as an urbanizing force in the Middle Ages.¹⁵

The social traditions of the Arabs meant that, wherever they settled, they were rarely country dwellers. Thus in the early years of their conquests they clung tenaciously to the desert margins. Later when a settlement developed, its desert name still bore witness to its origin. Thus the names Fustat and Kairawan both mean “a tent”. Apart from such desert-margin settlements, the immigrant peoples contemptuously shunned the “servility” of living in agricultural settlements; they were, by choice and because of their social traditions, urban dwellers.

Characteristics of Arab urbanism

A striking feature of the Arab urban network is its decided bias to inland locations. In fact, the difference between Roman and Arab urbanism may be reduced in essence to a shift from coastal to interior situations, from an outlook influenced by sea-power to one influenced by land-power. The Arabs began as a nation with land traditions. This resulted in a drastic change in the values and destinies of many cities and it explains the shift in importance that occurred, for example, from Antioch to Damascus in the Levant, from Alexandria to Fustat and Cairo in Egypt, as well as from Carthage to Kairawan in Tunisia. It is significant that the Arabs, throughout their sphere of conquest, had no coastal capital. Despite this thorough-going change, Arab urbanism did not break the basic continuity of most regional centres. Thus Baghdad, while occupying a new site, only inherited the general geographic location of Babylon and Ctesiphon; Fustat and Cairo, though abandoning the regional setting of Alexandria, similarly inherited the general situation of Roman Babylon and Pharaonic Memphis but with a new local site. Kairawan and Carthage, too, were two different sites within the same broad geographic frame.

Another salient feature in the Arab urban mesh was the competitive balance between different and sometimes distant localities. This was

due to a common dependence on transit trade—a highly changeable factor which readily responded to political vicissitudes and historical circumstances. This tug-of-war, as it could be termed, is best illustrated by the competing ports of the Persian Gulf on the one side of Arabia and those of the Red Sea on the other. Forming the two main axes of transit shipping around the peninsula, they acted as the sensitive arms of a pair of scales. Thus under the Umayyids, when the Levant was the centre of political gravity, but especially with the existence of the navigable Amir al Muminin canal linking Suez to Cairo, prime importance went to the Red Sea and its ports. With the shift of power from Umayyid Syria to Abbassid Irak in the eighth century, together with the filling in of the canal for political reasons, the Persian Gulf gained the upper hand; Siraf, Basra and Obulla superseded Clyzma (Suez), Aden and other intervening ports. Later, in the ninth century, however, political unrest and trouble in the south of Irak dealt a serious blow to navigation in the Persian Gulf, with the result that the importance of the Red Sea ports rose again. Apart from this broad, regional interaction, this phenomenon of port balance also took place on more modest levels. Along the coasts of the Red Sea ascendancy went to the western ports of Clyzma, Kosseir and 'Aidhab until the rise, under the Mamelukes, of Jidda in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries spelled the doom of 'Aidhab.

Medieval urbanism in Arab countries

We may now attempt a survey of the Arab medieval urban network in greater detail. Distinction should here be made between the Arab world proper and the Arab penumbra which includes the areas of the urbanizing activities of the Arabs in Africa south of the Sahara, as well as in southern Spain which temporarily formed part of the Arab world. For lack of space, this study will confine itself to the former sector.

IRAK

Basra and Kufa were both Arab foundations intended to act as military gateways to Irak—hence their desert-margin situation. These newly laid-out military centres, which were begun in A.D. 637 and 638 respectively, soon became important seats of administration. The original Basra, unlike the present-day river-bound city, was well removed from the river banks. The fact that its name means “rough shingle ground” (presumably elevated) may shed some light on its old site and its suitability for its initial military function. Kufa is more significant for its situation. Inheriting the location of the one-time thriving city of Al-Hira, it commanded the strategic “waist” of Mesopotamia. Of later appearance were the sacred twin religious cities of Najaf and Karbela, also on the desert fringes, which were destined to become the Mecca of the Shiites.

The "Round City" of Baghdad, built by the Abbassid Caliph Al-Mansur near the site of a previous Sassanid city of the same name, formed the nucleus of a town which was to become the greatest and most important urban centre of the Arabs in Irak. Indeed, with a population of 2 million, as one estimate puts it, it could be considered, in a sense, the capital "of the world" at this time.¹⁶ If this were true—and it must be taken with the greatest reserve—Baghdad should indeed be considered an urban mutation, far in advance of its time, since there is no other authentic record of a full million-city before the

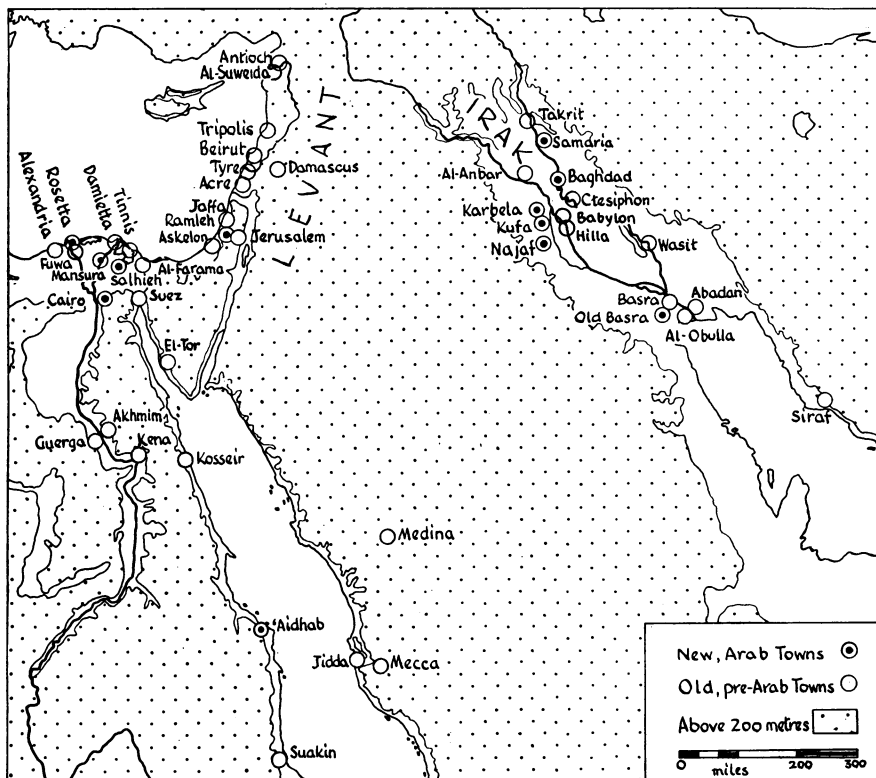


Fig. 1.—Urban centres in the medieval Arab East.

modern period. Its position on the Tigris was selected with an eye to proximity to Persia—the stronghold of the main following of Abbassid rule. The shift from Kufa and Basra to Baghdad points thus to a shift in political leanings from Arabs to Persians. The influence of physical geography, however, must be added to that of political geography. The choice of Baghdad meant a move from the Euphrates to the Tigris which river was spared the fate of silting-up that overtook the Euphrates.¹⁷ The building of the town in A.D. 765 began with a two-mile-radius circular plan (hence the appellation of "Round City")

with the caliph's palace at the centre, surrounded by the mosque, state offices and barracks. Two giant walls, both hemmed in by a deep moat, encompassed the nascent "fantastic mushroom"¹⁸ city which, we are told, took 100,000 men four years to build.¹⁹ The remnants of nearby Ctesiphon (Mada'in Kisra of the Arabs) were used for building material—a frequent occurrence in medieval urbanism. Built on the left bank, the city soon outgrew its walls and there developed right-bank suburbs such as Russafa. Yakubi, the Arab geographer, leaves us in no doubt that the founder Al-Mansur was fully aware of the strategic and economic advantages of the situation of Baghdad as a land-river node. Al-Mansur almost draws a word-map of the space-relations and natural nodality of his city when he writes: "... or else an island between Tigris and Euphrates ... a rendez-vous for the world, whither all that comes on the Tigris from Wasit, Basra, Obulla, Ahwaz, Persia, Oman, the Yemen, Bahrein etc. ... can ascend and land. In the same way whatever is carried on boats on the Tigris from Mosul, Diyar Rabi'ah, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and whatever is carried on boats on the Euphrates from Diyar Mudar, al-Rakkah, Syria, the Frontier, Egypt and North Africa, can come to this terminus and unload here. It can also be a meeting-place for the people of the Mountain, Isfahan and the Kuras of Khurasan."²⁰ He realized that its navigational possibilities made it, for all practical purposes, a sea-port on the Persian Gulf: "Besides, here is Tigris to put us in touch with lands as far as China and bring us all that the seas yield. . . ." It may be added that the city benefited from the unequal levels of the Tigris and Euphrates in the way of navigation as well as irrigation. Such, then, was Baghdad until its devastation by the Mongols and Tartars in 1258.

Samarra, founded in A.D. 841, lay 60 miles north of Baghdad. It was built as a court city to house the Turks, then rising to power in the State, and too numerous to be accommodated in Baghdad. The rise of Samarra points also to a shift in political power from the Persians to the Turks. It is interesting that the movement from Baghdad to Samarra falls in line with an historical, persistent, northward trek of the capital in Irak—a trek which, beginning in ancient times, continued through classical down to Moslem times.²¹

We also find that the shift of political power from Umayyid Levant and Damascus to Abbassid Irak and Baghdad engendered a parallel shift in navigation from the Red Sea route to the Persian Gulf. The old ports were resuscitated and new ones were created. Thus Al-Obulla, ancient Apologus, became a twin port of Basra. Although the latter was by far the greater port, it could not be reached by the bigger vessels, which had to land at Al-Obulla. Yet even Al-Obulla was not easily accessible to the bigger ships; hence Siraf had to be built on the Persian side, south of Shiraz. A "necessity port" sited, much like Aden, in dry, hot and desolate surroundings, Siraf, however, attained

paramount importance in the China trade, becoming, again like Aden, "a gateway to China". Ocean-going vessels normally ended their voyages there, whence merchandise was transferred by barges and lighters to Basra. After the ninth century, however, Irak was on the wane, and the "Zanj (Negro) Rebellion" ruined both Al-Obulla and Basra, while Siraf was devastated by an earthquake at the end of the century.²² Baghdad was thus stranded and trade swung back to the Red Sea. The tenth century witnessed the sorry decline of Baghdad and the centre of gravity shifted to Fustat and Cairo. As Makdissi says at the end of the tenth century, "Know further that Baghdad was immense in the past, but has now gone to ruin and lost its splendour. . . . Fustat to-day is like Baghdad of yore, I know not of a grander city in Islam."²³

THE LEVANT

In the Levant the Arabs introduced basic changes. Antioch (at one time with a population estimated at three-quarters of a million²⁴) had been the capital of Byzantine Syria, and Jerusalem had been the chief city of Palestine, but the Arabs moved to Damascus and Ramleh, the latter being a new foundation. Seleucia, the ancient Roman port serving Antioch, had silted up and, a little to the south, at the mouth of the Orontes, was built the new port of Al-Suweida (later known to the Crusaders as Port St. Simon). Seleucia was finally abandoned during the Crusades.²⁵ Antioch itself, a central communication focus in the Byzantine empire, became extremely marginal within the new Arab realm—hence its decline. On the other hand, Damascus suddenly found herself well placed with reference to the new centres of power—Baghdad, Mecca and Cairo—and thus inherited the functions and advantages of Antioch. It soon became a prominent agricultural, industrial and commercial centre. Some Syrian ports rose to importance under the Arabs; for example, Tyre, Acre, Tripolis, Latakia, Beirut, Jaffa and Askelon. On the other hand, however, the desert-margin cities underwent a serious process of decline. This has been attributed by some to climatic desiccation,²⁶ but others refute this hypothesis and simply refer to administrative and technical neglect.

EGYPT

The Arabs started in Egypt by abandoning Alexandria, which had been the capital under both Rome and Byzantium and had reached a population of some 600,000. If we follow Ibn Abd al-Hakam, that figure should be raised for the time of the conquest, because he says, ". . . there was then counted 600,000, excluding women and children."²⁷ The Arabs decided against Alexandria because its coastal position, which suited the Romans, was inimical to them. Pirenne seeks to attribute the decline of Alexandria to the "unity of the Mediterranean" hypothesis—that is, as long as the two shores were under one and the

same power, her prosperity was guaranteed.²⁸ Accordingly, with the southern shore politically severed from the northern, the sea became no longer a link but a barrier, and therein lay the decline of Alexandria. It has been estimated that by A.D. 860 the population of Alexandria had dropped to 100,000.²⁹ This decline went hand in hand with the rise of interior Fustat. And it is doubly significant that the new seat was not only sited away from the sea, but also, unlike Pharaonic Memphis, was deliberately built on the right bank of the river in order to avoid the slightest water barrier from the Arabian motherland. Under the influence of new dynasties, the capital underwent a series of short moves to new sites: thus to Fustat were later added Al-Kataii and Al-Askar. Helwan, the present-day spa town, first appeared as a health asylum, a sanatorium-city for an Umayyid ruler during a ravaging epidemic. Cairo first appears at the time of the Fatimids in the tenth century and subsequently rose to immense importance. Piloti, a Venetian traveller of the fifteenth century, was struck by its magnitude, “. . . La cité du Cayre est la plus grande cité qui soit au monde, de celles qui on scet auprès de nous”³⁰

As a result of these fundamental changes in the urban mesh, further related changes also took place. Thus Alexandria, though still important as an entrepôt for trade from the East until at least the twelfth century (as witnessed by Ibn Jubair),³¹ had materially dwindled. The Arab *enceinte* of the city, built in A.D. 811, only covered half the area of the city of Hadrian's time.³² This relative decline of Alexandria gave a chance to other new ports to take part in the trade of Egypt; for example, Al-Farama (Pelusium), Damietta, Rosetta and Tinnis. Thanks to their more direct and easier water communications with Cairo, and to their forward position on the distributary mouths of the Nile, Rosetta and Damietta were flourishing cities throughout the Middle Ages.³³ Rosetta was founded about A.D. 870 by the Abbassid Caliph Al-Mutawakkil to inherit the distributary-mouth situation of its predecessor Fuwa, which had increasingly become inaccessible to vessels. Abu Al-Fida tells us, however, that Rosetta remained small until the thirteenth century, and in fact remained inferior to Fuwa until the sixteenth century.³⁴ It would seem that, throughout the Middle Ages, Rosetta served as an out-port for Fuwa. As to Tinnis it was, as Ibn Iyas says, one “of the grandest cities, until overtaken by the sea water a hundred years before the conquest. It remained populous until 573 A.H. [A.D. 1193] when, besieged by the Franks, its inhabitants fled to Damietta. It was then seized and burned by the Franks who left it in ruins until Sultan Al-Kamil came in 624 A.H. [about A.D. 1244] and ordered the demolition of the remainder of its wall and houses. It has since remained desolate.”³⁵ Siyuti adds that it was so big that it included 83,000 adults subject to the poll-tax.³⁶

In general, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that a salient characteristic of Arab urbanism in Egypt was the decline of the coastal

towns to the advantage of those in the interior. It is noteworthy that all fresh foundations had interior locations.

The movement of the premier capital city to Cairo resulted first in the appearance of new towns and second in the increased importance of previously insignificant places. Thus the prosperity of Clyzma (Suez), which inherited the role of the Graeco-Roman Myos Hermos on the Red Sea, though partly influenced by the tug-of-war between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf routes, nevertheless closely followed the ups and downs of Cairo. During the Crusades, when the position of Suez was beset with military dangers in the eleventh century, a new port, wholly and artificially created, came to be associated with the Cairene emporium. This was 'Aidhab which received its water supply and food from the Nile valley.³⁷ Lying opposite Jidda, it was connected by road with Koft (near the ancient Coptos) and thence with the Nile Valley. 'Aidhab figures as the sole port of Egypt on the Red Sea in Idrissi's map of the twelfth century.³⁸ It assumed special importance under the Fatimids when, in the eleventh century, the Delta was temporarily depopulated during the famous Mustansiri Crisis (Al-Shidda Al-Mustansiriya), and when, as a result, the pilgrims' route from the Maghreb had to be diverted from Sinai to the Nile Valley in Upper Egypt via 'Aidhab. The rise of 'Aidhab was responsible for the rise in importance of Kous, which was described by Makrizi as "the greatest city of Upper Egypt".³⁹ Later, however, 'Aidhab declined materially partly as a result of the decline of Upper Egypt and of Kous, following a series of failures of the Nile waters during the fourteenth century, and largely as a result of the emergence of Jidda as a rival port for the Aden trade. The real *coup de grâce* came, however, when a Mameluke sultan moved the customs of Egypt from 'Aidhab to Suez and El-Tor in order to concentrate competition against Jidda. This was accompanied by an unparalleled episode in the history of Egyptian urbanism, namely the complete demolition of the port in 1426 and the removal of its traders. It was this tragic end of 'Aidhab which gave nearby Suakin, previously insignificant, its chance. It grew steadily until it was described by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century as the greatest port of the Orient and as generally unsurpassed except by Lisbon.

Other urban vicissitudes were experienced during the Arab period, especially in Upper Egypt. Thus Akhmim, Koft and Kous were at one time or another amongst the leading cities. Prior to the arrival of the Arabs, Koft had been the leading commercial centre of the Kena Bend, but had been devastated by the days of Abu Al-Fida. Thereupon its position was inherited by Kous, described by Abu Al-Fida as the biggest city in Egypt next to Cairo and as being the great entrepôt for Aden.⁴⁰ Other towns, such as Mansura (1230) and Salhieh, were founded under different circumstances.⁴¹ Built under the Ayyubids,

during and because of the Crusades, these two nascent bastions typify the role of the politico-military function in Arab urbanism.

THE MAGHREB

In this area,* the urbanizing activities of the Arabs also fell into two categories—the founding of new towns and the reviving of Cartagenian or Roman centres. Of the latter, Bizerta, of Phoenician origin, was the most important and became one of the main Arab centres. This was also the case with Constantine. Meknes, originally Berber, was later rehabilitated and in the seventeenth century was provided with a galaxy of royal palaces and became a true court-city.

The Maghreb was easily the most favoured of all regions in the Arab realm for new foundations—in this respect it was the exact antithesis of Spain. Nearly as many new towns were founded here as in the whole of the Arab East. This unique urban explosion started with military and ended with religious motivation. The initial attempt was in Tunisia (Ifrikiyya of the Arabs). With the Arabs advancing by land, resistance from coastal towns backed by marine units provided a bitter experience to them. Hence General Okba deliberately chose Kairawan (670) for his new base. It had a safe, interior situation well away from the coast and existing cities such as Susa and Carthage. The latter was almost wholly ruined in 698. Like Mecca, the location of Kairawan cannot therefore be explained, as Despois⁴² rightly judges, solely in terms of physical or climatic geography. Sited 30 miles from the coast, without any navigable channel or particular land routes and in a poor, unproductive countryside, nothing but historical accident and military needs can explain it. The Arabs later found it to be well suited to their purposes because it served as a bridgehead for further inland penetration. Swept by the famous Beni Hilal-and-Selim wave of the mid-eleventh century, Kairawan was completely ruined in 1052. An ancient Punic suburb of Carthage, Tynes, was chosen as a substitute and became known as Tunis. It was partly built with the relics of Carthage and subsequently, under the Hafsids, grew tremendously to become the pivot of North Africa. Estimated to harbour 200,000 in 1517, it was evidently one of the greatest cities of Islam.⁴³

Of the new religious cities, Fez must be given pride of place. Old Fez was begun in 806 by the Idrissites, while New Fez was added only in 1276. Its period of greatest prosperity was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries under the Almohades when, it is claimed, the population reached 400,000.⁴⁴ But it was subject to the recurrent incursions of Berber tribes and later received a mighty influx of the

* Since their conquest of North Africa the Arabs have generally divided their realm into the Mashrik (the Arab East) including Arab Asia and Egypt; and the Maghreb (the West) including northwest Africa and, until the Christian reconquest, Spain. In the present study, the Maghreb is confined to northwest Africa.

Moriscos, driven out of Spain at the Re-conquest. Mahdiya in Tunisia, founded by the early Fatimids in A.D. 916 to be their stepping-stone to Egypt and to be a base for their political power and for the propagation of the Shiite creed, is another religious creation. Its importance waned considerably, however, with the final movement of the Fatimids to Egypt.

The influence of the political factor of dynastic succession was no less clearly developed in the Maghreb than it was in Arab Egypt. To begin with, it was Fatimid generals who first founded Gazayer Beni Mezghana (gazayer = islets), which later became Algiers, as well as Media. To the Beni Hammad dynasty was due the founding in 1017 of Alcala (the citadel) which they left in 1158 for another new capital of their own making, namely Bougie. In the fourteenth century

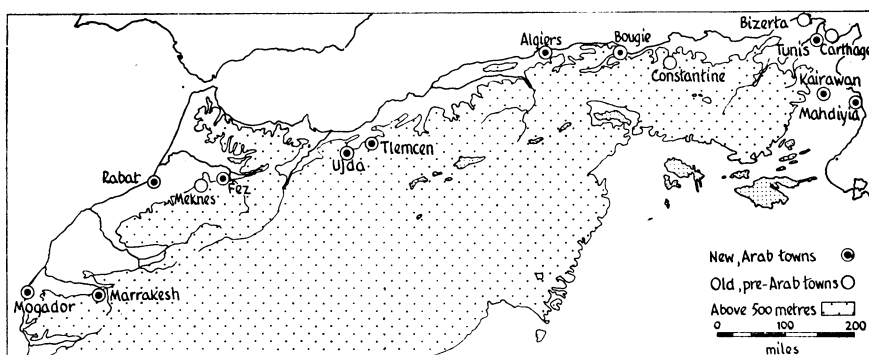


Fig. 2.—Major urban centres in medieval Maghreb.

Tlemcen became the capital of yet another dynasty, Beni Zayan, and was counted among the greatest Moslem capitals, rivalling Cairo, Baghdad and Cordova. Because of its central, commanding position, Gazayer Beni Mezghana was chosen by the Turks in 1519 as their naval base and capital. The sea arms between the islets were filled in, tying them to the mainland. It became known simply as Al-Gazayer (Algiers) and has since remained the capital of Algeria. Further west in Morocco (Al-Maghreb al-Aksa, the Far West), Marrakesh was created in the eleventh century by Almoravides.⁴⁵ The sultans of Morocco also founded Mogador in order to rival Agadir as an outlet for the southern coastlands, but this move met with no great success. Rabat and Ujda were the fruit of the religious activities of the Arabs here.

The Dark Ages of Arab urbanism

It should be emphasized, however, that the Arab medieval period was by no means one of sustained urban prosperity. The fact is that the real *poussée urbaine* was confined to the first two or three centuries

which represent the "heroic age" of Arab urbanism in particular and of Arab culture in general, while the later centuries experienced decided stagnation, if not indeed decline. This trend became all the more important after the fifteenth century. Two basic factors conspired to bring this decisive downfall. The advent of Ottoman rule, synonymous everywhere with backwardness and degeneracy, was soon coupled with the changes consequent upon the discovery of the Cape

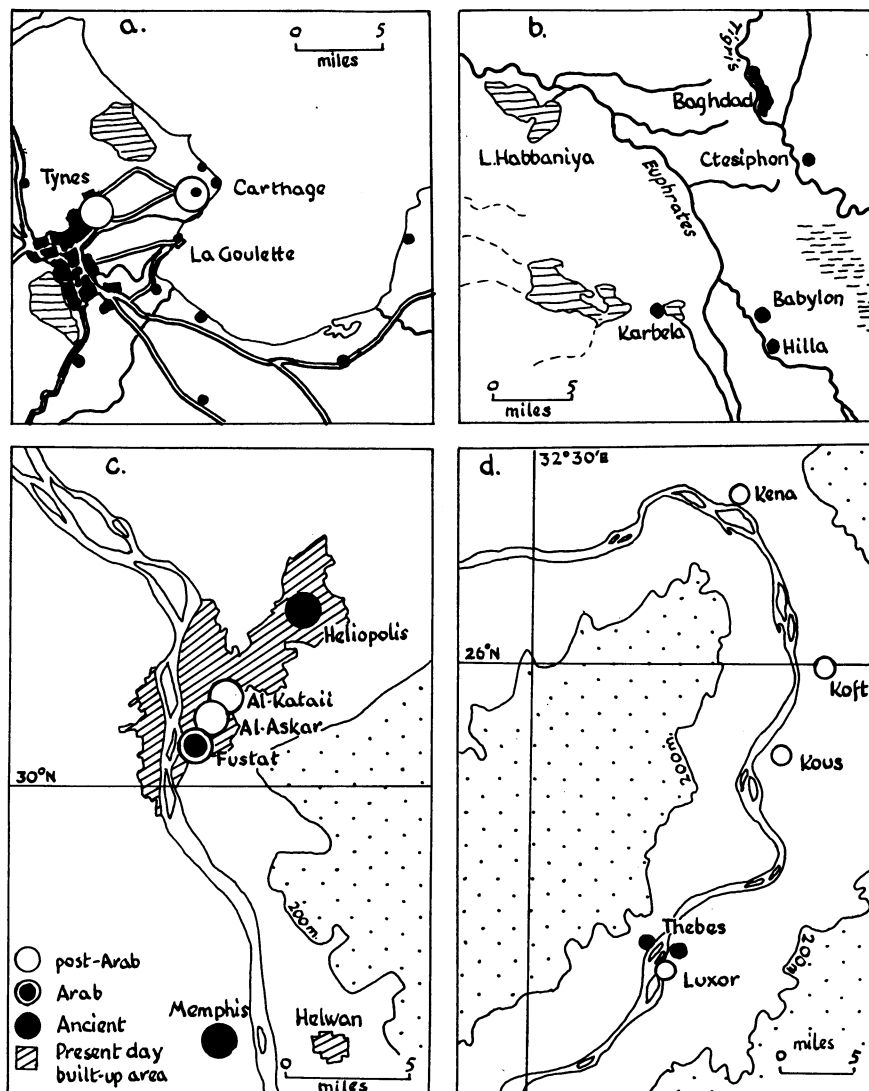


Fig. 3.—Constants and variables in urban location. Four strategic urban "situations" each successively occupied by a multiplicity of "sites" representing A. Allix's *doublets de villes*. All situations command some regional "waist": (a) Tunis, the waist of the Mediterranean; (b) Baghdad, the waist of Iraq; (c) Cairo, the waist of the Nile valley; (d) Kena, the waist of the Eastern desert.

Route to India and the Far East. This sudden "transport capture" left the Mediterranean highway a cul-de-sac, and turned the Middle East from being the world's premier trade route into a blind alley. A process of de-urbanization in the Arab world was inevitable; the "dark ages" of the Middle East at last set in. The front of urbanization generally shrank, most cities dwindled in population, some entirely disappeared, while to found new cities became the exception.

The essential geographic reason for this urban regression was that the basis of urbanism in the Arab East, deriving its prosperity from transit trade, was inherently vulnerable. Depending not on resources of "site" (taken in a broad regional sense)⁴⁶ but rather on resources of "situation" within the frame of the *oikoumene*, there was little control on the reins of urban life. In particular, those urban agglomerations that primarily depended on their local, mainly agricultural, resources (which means the towns of the interior) were less disastrously affected than were the coastal towns that depended on foreign trade. A good example of this is to be found in the tragic decline of Alexandria compared with the relative tenacity of Cairo. The decline of the leading cities was such that Fuwa rose during the sixteenth century according to the Frenchman B  lon who visited Egypt in 1530, to be the second largest city of the country. The subsequent neglect by the Ottomans of the Alexandria canal, that took off at Fuwa, spelled its decline and allowed Rosetta to become twice its size.⁴⁷ Further changes in the urban hierarchy took place during these later centuries. Thus since the arrival of the Turks, Kena inherited the rank and role of medieval Kous, and by the late eighteenth century Guerga had become capital of Upper Egypt.⁴⁸

No reliable figures for city populations can be offered to demonstrate the changing destinies of these settlements of the Middle East and North Africa. Some estimates of nineteenth-century populations⁴⁹ show the situation that must have existed already for some time when Napoleon was embarking upon the French expedition to Egypt at the end of the eighteenth century. Alexandria had fallen to a miserable coastal village of some 7000 inhabitants; Cairo barely exceeded a quarter of a million.⁵⁰

| | <i>Year</i> | <i>Population</i> | | <i>Year</i> | <i>Population</i> |
|-----------|-------------|-------------------|------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Jerusalem | 1860 | 12,000 | Baghdad | 1831 | 20,000 |
| Haifa | 1860 | 1,000 | Cairo | 1848 | 254,000 |
| Beirut | 1820 | 8,000 | Alexandria | 1848 | 134,000 |
| Aleppo | 1845 | 77,000 | Tunis | 1881 | 120,000 |
| Damascus | 1849 | 150,000 | | | |

From these one may guess at the abysmal decline that befell the Arab cities during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, when western Europe was exploding around the world, and in contrast to the astonishing feats of urban development that took place in the Arab world some thousand years ago.

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