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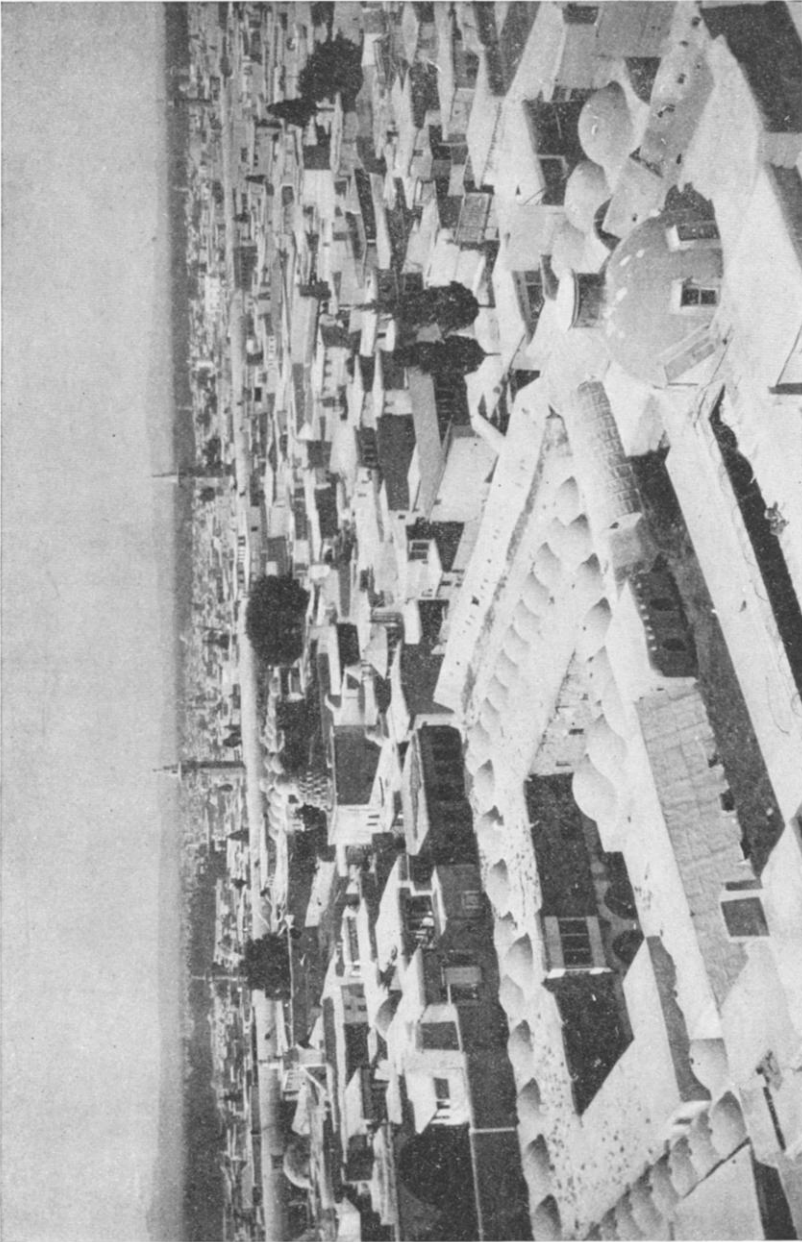
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DAMASCUS: THE PEARL OF THE DESERT

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Among the Arabs Damascus is known by several picturesque names, each derived from some characteristic of the city itself. Its inhabitants assert that it is the oldest city in the world, hence it is quite frequently called the "Immortal City." As to the truth of this we are not prepared to say. Its foundation is lost in the shadowy mists of the world's twilight, and in the absence of historic facts no positive statements can be made. Yet there is not a fallen city today but Damascus was old when it was built, and still flourishes long after it has passed away. Amid the growth and decay, the rise and fall of races and dynasties, of civilizations and religions which have thronged the world for four thousand years Damascus has remained the one perennially great world-city. So we may in all truth claim that if it be not the oldest then it is assuredly among the oldest cities of the earth, older by ages than the "Eternal City," as Rome proudly boasts herself to be. Another title which shows the poetry of oriental imagination is "The Pearl Set in Emeralds." The appropriateness of this name is easily appreciated when the city is viewed from the top of one of the neighboring hills whence its oval shape is best seen. The color of the city is pearl gray and it is surrounded on all sides by gardens composed of shrubbery and verdure without number and trees uncountable, giving to the "pearl" the "emerald setting."

The situation of Damascus is remarkable—she stands isolated on an oasis of the vast desert which everywhere hems her in. You may see from Damascus the sunset first touch with purple the low western hills twenty-five miles away. These hills mark the beginning of the great desert—beyond them there is nothing but a rolling waste and the long roads to Palmyra and Baghdad. The permanence and prosperity of Damascus are due to the presence of two rivers, which have converted this spot of the dreary, desolate, and uninhabited



GENERAL VIEW OF DAMASCUS

desert into a smiling and well-watered plain. The Pharpar approaches only within seven miles of Damascus, but by means of canals and aqueducts sends its life-giving waters to the gardens of the city. The Abana is the stream from which the city's main supply of water is obtained. Minerva-like it springs full-born from the base of a perpendicular rock at Ain Fijih in the heart of the Anti-Lebanons, and runs a course of ten miles in a gorge, a large river 20-30 feet wide

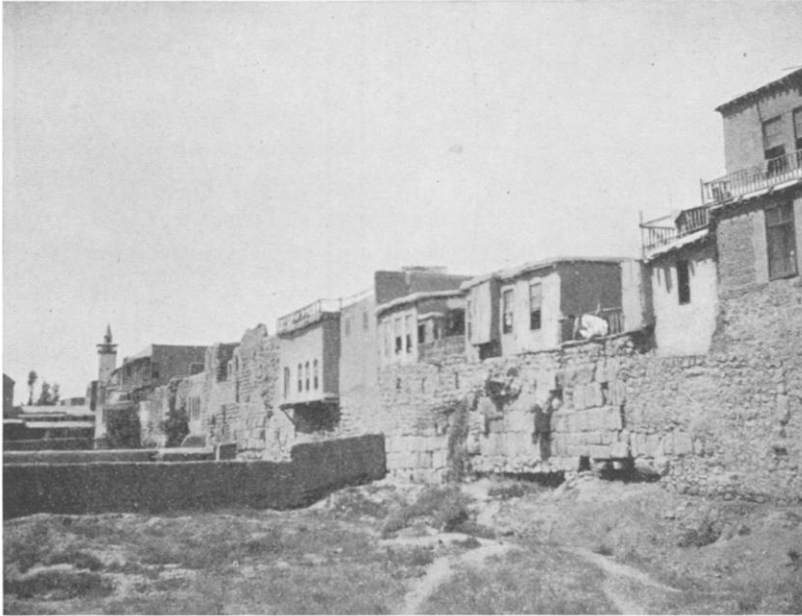


THE SOURCE OF THE ABANA AT AIN FIJIH

and 4 feet deep, its waters always fresh and ice-cold, casting out branches everywhere, permeating every nook and corner of the city, until as one has said, "Literally there is scarce a street, bazar, khan, courtyard, or dwelling house which has not its marble or stone fountain constantly filled with running water supplied directly by the Abana itself." Thus the Abana, not fruitlessly wasting her waters on that thirsty land, saves them in her narrow gorge till she can fling them well out on the desert and expends all her life at once in the creation of a single city.

An astonishing site, too, for the most enduring city in the world; for it is utterly incapable of defense, and it is removed from the sea

and from the great natural routes of commerce and trade. Yet Damascus is a great harbor of refuge upon the first sea man ever learned to sail—the great desert. It is because there is nothing but desert beyond or immediately behind her that Damascus has endured and must endure. Thus standing on the vanishing point of fertility, on the shore of the much-voyaged desert, Damascus is alike indispensable to civilization and the nomads. Nineveh, Babylon, and Mem-



HOUSES BUILT ON THE WALL OF DAMASCUS

phis easily conquered her—she preceded them and has outlived them.

She has been twice supplanted by Antioch and she has seen Antioch decay; by Baghdad, and Baghdad is forgotten. She has been many times sacked and twice at least the effective classes of her population have been swept into captivity, but this has not broken the chain of her history. She was once capital of the world from the Atlantic to the Bay of Bengal, but the vast empire went from her and she has continued to flourish as before.

Again, Damascus is the city of the Mediterranean world which

lies nearest to the Far East, and hence on the great highroad between the heart of Asia and the Phoenician ports of the Great Sea.

In the golden days of Assyria and Babylonia huge caravans of camels laden with merchandise passed and repassed the great Syrian desert between Nineveh, Babylon, and the other mighty cities of the valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris and the busy emporium of commerce at Damascus. Persia and India, Turkestan and Mongolia, vied with each other in securing for their merchants a lucrative and successful market in this active center of business, whither came also from the west to exchange with them their articles of manufacture and produce the traders of Tyre and Sidon, of Greece and Egypt.

The city has always been known as possessing great activity in all lines of commerce, manufacture, and industry. Her swords were celebrated throughout all the nations of antiquity; her name is preserved in such common terms as "damask silk," "damask curtains," "damask linen," etc., while her skill in all sorts of metal work is proverbial. Even today she is still able to maintain her reputation when brought into competition with western industries.

Damascus though aged and full of history has not of her own accord made history. Rather has she been content to bow the knee to the stronger, to open her gates to the invader, and to shift her politics with the change of the wind. Besieged times without number, never has she offered a prolonged resistance to her opponent, never has she displayed the stout old martial spirit of Rome. Owing largely to this fact she has come down to us intact. Her history may roughly be divided into three periods: First, her existence as an independent power to the time of her capture by the Assyrians. Thenceforward the ancient city seems entirely to have lost its independence, and was ruled in turn by Assyrians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. It was during this second period, which extended up to the coming of the Moslems, that her great reputation in commercial activity and manufacture was attained. Civilization was in an advanced state; learning flourished. The third and most brilliant history of the city began with the coming of the followers of Mohammed. Ruled over by the Caliphs for a long while, then by the Mamelukes of Egypt, it was at length captured by the Turkish emperor Selim and has remained as a part of the Turkish empire ever since. Today it has a population of 180,000—the largest city in Syria.

The chief attractions at Damascus are the world-famed gardens

which surround the city, the glimpses we get of oriental life as found in the bazaars, the streets, the shops, and last but by no means of less interest, the famous Mosque of the Omeiades.

One hundred and fifty square miles of green lie in compact order round about Damascus spread out with all the profusion of a virgin forest. Orchards and flower gardens, parks, plantations of corn and of other produce pass before the eye in rapid and changeable



THE COURT OF THE GREAT MOSQUE, DAMASCUS

succession. The natives claim that there are more than three thousand miles of shady lanes in the gardens of Damascus through which it is possible to ride. On such a ride the visitor passes

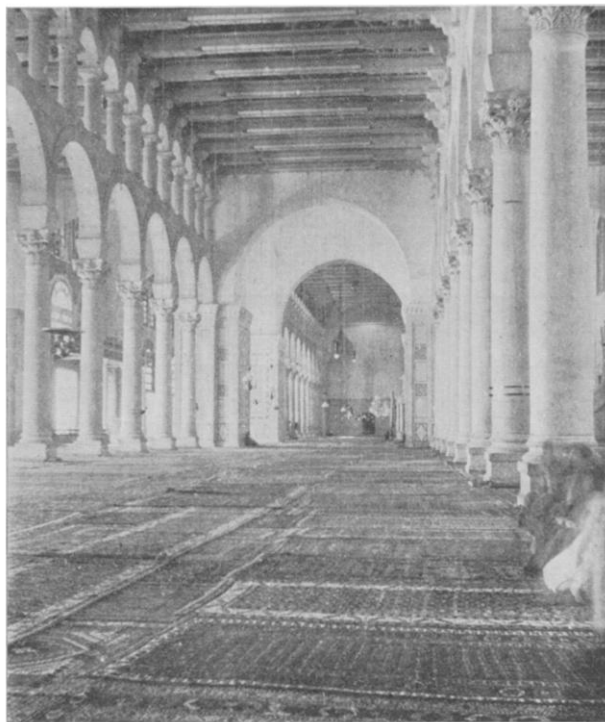
orchards of figs and orchards of apricots. For hedges there is the briar rose and for a canopy the walnut. Pomegranate blossoms glow through the shade; the vine boughs trail across the briars; a little waterfall breaks on the edge of the road, and all this water and leafage are so lavish that the broken mud walls and slovenly houses have no power to vex the eye.

These long gardens of Damascus form the paradise of the Arab

world. Making a pilgrimage to the city after weeks and months of dreary and desolate desert life, the running water is a joy to his sight and music to his ears and it is something to walk through shady lanes, to admire the variety of landscape and the beauty of scenery in a land where the sun beats down all day with unremitting force till the earth is like a furnace of iron beneath a sky of molten brass.

Along with the gardens of Damascus are to be considered the bazaars. Here is found a rich banquet of color to one who has an eye for the picturesque and the beautiful, and imagination for romance and poetry, and a wit to read the city's destiny in the faces she has gathered from both Levant and Orient. There is a beauty and a fascination to be found in the long twilight tunnels shot by solid shafts of light. Here the merchant displays his wares for sale and patiently awaits the arrival of a customer confident that whatever is to be will surely be. In the open shops rich carpets are seen, tasseled saddle bags, heaps of melons and fruit, sweetmeats, grain, snow from Lebanon, human dress, and best of all human flesh. The dark-skinned Algerian and dusky Sudanese, the pale-faced townsman and the Jew, with dirty lovelocks and downcast eyes, crush through the motley throng. Now passes a woman with her child swung on her back or shoulder, her face covered with a disfiguring veil, through which her painted eyes wander restlessly to and fro; now comes a black-robed sheikh, with dignified step, who has a way respectfully cleared for him. The most picturesque and remarkable of all the figures of this eastern crowd is undoubtedly the bedouin "fellah," or farmer. He is strong but wiry, slender in frame, graceful in movement as he follows his stately camels or stops to purchase cloth or provisions. His striped abba hangs easily in heavy folds over his shoulder, and his dark skin, prominent features, and keen black eye all mark the unchanged son of the desert, who belongs not to the city, but passes through it, indifferent to its conveniences and luxuries, and like his ancestors, despising its customs. The cries of the street venders form a never-ending attraction to one who understands the language. The vender of refreshments carrying on his back a wide two-handled jar with a narrow neck, shouts: "Refresh thine heart," or, "Allay thy heat," or extols its coolness in the words, "Take care of your teeth." Fruit is sold in a similar manner. Vegetables, cucumbers, turnips, and the

like, are pickled in vinegar and carried through the streets for sale in wooden tubs. The cry of the seller is: "O father of a family, buy a load," or "Tender cresses from the cool spring. If an old woman eats them, she will be young next morning." There a water-bearer, with loud voice, invites all passers by to drink: "O thirsty one, the distribution," he explains, for some charitable person has bought the



THE INTERIOR OF THE GREAT MOSQUE, DAMASCUS

contents of his water skin and desired the carrier to distribute it gratuitously to all comers. Then there is the Druze with mountain blood in his cheeks, and the Turk, and Greek, and Kurd.

But even the bazaars of Damascus fail to exhaust the significance of the city. Three great roads go forth, to the west, the south, and the east. The east is the road to Baghdad, the west travels by Galilee to the Levant and the Nile, the south, which leaves the city by the

“gates of God,” takes the pilgrims to Mecca, for Islam has made Damascus the western port for Mecca.

In the history of religion Damascus was the center of two great crises. She was the scene of the conversion of the first apostle of Christianity to the gentiles. She was the first Christian city to be taken by Islam. The great Christian cathedral which rose on the ruins of the heathen temple was dedicated, not to St. Paul, but to John the Baptist. In the middle of the seventh century, the Moslems seized the building and converted it into a Mohammedan mosque, adorning it with costly tiles and mosaics, as well as with numerous other decorations of countless value. Islam boasts three mosques of unusual beauty and cost, the Mosque of Omar at Jerusalem, that of St. Sophia at Constantinople, and this Mosque of the Omeiades at Damascus. This splendid edifice was destroyed by fire in 1069, again in 1400, and yet again in 1893. Since this last fire, the Moslems have spared no effort to restore the great mosque to its former grandeur and have to a large extent succeeded. One of the most interesting of its possessions is a lovely shrine, known as the shrine of John the Baptist. An old legend states that his head was interred on the spot where the shrine stands. In our eyes, the thing of most interest in connection with the mosque is the famous Greek inscription carved on its northern entrance, which was in the beginning a part of the Christian church, destroyed to make room for the present building which has defied both time and fire, and today stands as a part of one of the greatest of Mohammedan buildings, testifying to the utter worthlessness of the cause it is intended to advance: “Thy kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting Kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations.”

From the summit of a lofty hill that commands an excellent view of the city, tradition loves to relate that the great founder of Islam, Mohammed, once stood and viewed the vision of beauty and joy spread out at his feet. Long and wonderingly did he stand, enraptured with the vision. Then, with a sigh, he turned away, going no nearer Damascus. “For,” said he, “if I once set my foot on such an earthly paradise, I shall have no desire for the paradise of the hereafter, and man can only enter into paradise once.”