

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ISLAMIC CITIES

Donald Whitcomb

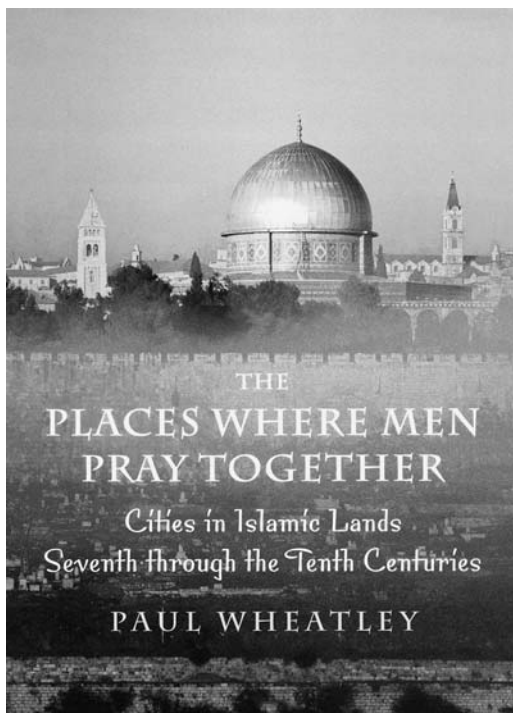
A new research project announced in last year's *Annual Report* on the subject of Sasanian and Islamic cities in Iran has been postponed as far as active fieldwork is concerned. In point of fact, that project is actually a subset of a larger and more constant research project — the archaeology of the early Islamic city, a broad field of research which has a long and important history.

Some years ago, Donald Whitcomb sponsored a student workshop on Middle East Urbanism intended to continue the University of Chicago's tradition of research into the process of urbanization and urban origins, areas in which the Oriental Institute and the University have a world-wide reputation. An early focus for study of traditional urbanism and city origins at the University of Chicago took advantage of the field research and academic interests of scholars in the Oriental Institute and the Department of Anthropology. The research of Robert McCormick Adams may be taken as indicative of synthetic contributions made in this field. At much the same time, scholars of the Islamic city such as G. von Grünebaum and L. Massignon were working mainly through the Committee on Social Thought and Department of Geography. This research was continued by the late professor Paul Wheatley whose monograph, *The Places where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries* (Chicago, 2001), explores the literary evidence of the early Islamic city and, it is fair to say, includes archaeological evidence mainly as a result of this workshop.

The workshop provided a combination of theory with archaeological and documentary data that proved useful for students, archaeologists (from as remote a period as the Early Bronze Age), and Islamic historians (not normally drawn to study material culture). The subject was not a narrow focus but a convenient framework toward which disparate interests have been drawn,

with an emphasis placed on topography and regional hierarchy. From 1992 to 1997 there were papers on the Arabian city, Islamic towns of Yemen (Zabid), Syria (Aleppo), and Morocco (Sijilmasa), and subjects ranging from Bronze Age settlement in Palestine to Ottoman guild structures. All this provided the basis for a growing thesis on the structure and functional elements of the early Islamic urban foundations.

During these years (actually decades) Whitcomb has pursued the problem of the origins of the Islamic city in field excavations, first at 'Aqaba, a walled city (*miṣr*) imitating a late Roman legionary fort, and then at Qinnasrīn, where a pre-Islamic Arab camp (*ḥaḍīr*) was transformed into a city, literally the settlement of nomads in the seventh century. The proposed field research in Iran, described last year, represents a return to his original field of research and dual problems of the nature of the Sasanian city and origins of the Islamic city, what one might label "from *shahr* to *madīna*." Both the



sites of Istakhr near Persepolis and Jundi Shapur in Khuzestan were selected for their potential importance toward understanding this transition and foundation of early Islamic cities in the Iranian setting. With the unexpected delay of this fieldwork, there have been occasions (actually the opportunities presented by participating in conferences; see personal research) to pursue the archaeological evidence of early Islamic cities in other regions.

From Qayṣariya to Fuṣṭāṭ

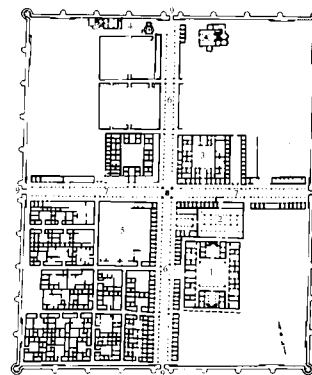
The archaeological site of Qayṣariya, the classical Caesarea Maritima, has produced an abundance of evidence for the Islamic periods. This material comes from earlier excavations, when it was a mere annoyance to be recorded, and from more recent projects intended to recover the Islamic city. The excavations by Haifa University under Yael Arnon, for example, have yielded a new Abbasid city, orthogonally constructed, in the inner harbor. This and other work has revealed the prosperous city under the Abbasid and Fatimid dynasties (eighth–tenth centuries), a city described by the geographer al-Muqaddasī.

Ken Holum, one of the excavators most concerned with the transition from Caesarea to Qayṣariya, invited me to attempt a synthesis of this formidable amount of information. The purpose was to reconstruct the foundation of the Islamic city, enabled through the model of the early Islamic city mentioned above. Curiously, al-Muqaddasī brings another dimension to this reconstruction; he describes Qayṣariya as if its urban structure belonged to an older pattern, one often identified with the Iranian world. He identifies first the citadel, the *ḥiṣn* of Qayṣariya; second is the *madīna* (or *shahristān* in the East), which now can be recognized in the Inner Harbor and neighborhoods to the immediate north and east. The third element is the *rabaḍ* or suburbs, which are noted as populous and protected by the citadel. There are indeed reasons, such as the importation of Persian settlers by the Caliph Mu‘awīya, for seeing an Iranian urban template. In this pattern, the Islamic city was located eccentrically, toward the southern and eastern portions of the classical city. One may posit that the district had probably been unpopulated, like the south and southwest of the Ḥaram al-Sharīf in Jerusalem.

This hypothetical reconstruction bears some similarity to that of early Fuṣṭāṭ, and an opportunity came three months later to explore the early Islamic foundation of Cairo. Fuṣṭāṭ was one of the first capital cities founded after the Muslim conquest and, like Basra, Kufa and other foundations, this settlement was a new location and not the modification of an older classical city (e.g., Alexandria). In order to examine the urban structure of Fuṣṭāṭ, one must look both backward and forward: on the one hand, toward archaeological origins in Arabia, and on the other, into the



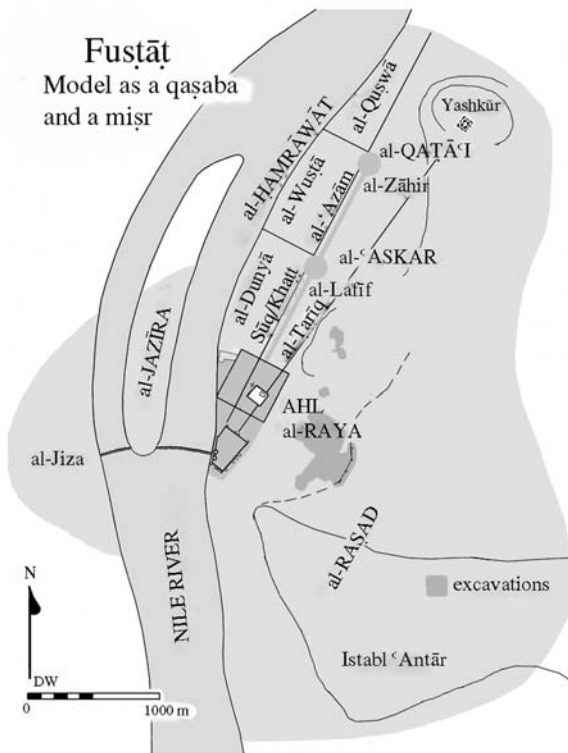
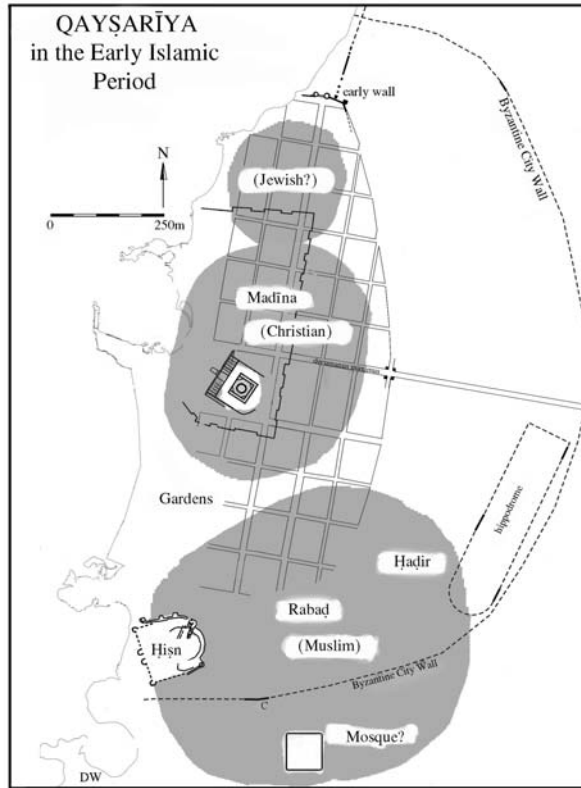
Photograph and plan of 'Anjar in Lebanon



RESEARCH

equally arcane later medieval literary topographies. While the extensive excavations present a “riddle,” as George Scanlon of the American University in Cairo has epitomized, the evidence suggests the key lies in the central district, the *khiṭṭa* known as the Ahl al-Raya. Within this area (ca. 400 × 400 m), bounded by the older fortification of Babylon and the monastery complex of Abū Ṣayfayn, one may postulate a town with elements not unlike those found in older Arabian cities.

This urban core expanded two times with the satellite towns of al-‘Askar in the eighth century and al-Qaṭā‘i in the ninth. One might consider this pattern as a possible Iranian urban form, as suggested for Qayṣariya. The complexity of this urban history is amplified with the contextualization of the *khiṭṭāt* of Fustat. These were the tribal settlements, some thirty-five to forty in number, which spread over 5 km along the



Nile. If the Ahl al-Raya might be considered as a *qaṣaba* or town, then what is the conglomeration of all the *khiṭṭāt* of Fustat, an expanse so large that it could contain two new *qaṣabāt*, al-‘Askar and al-Qaṭā‘i? One might suggest that al-Muqaddasī had found the most appropriate designation for this and other very large early Islamic foundations, the *miṣr* or metropolis. This term, which has been limited to the conception of a “garrison town” or cantonment, may be realized as an Umayyad solution, based on their South Arabian heritage, to the problem of structural organization of a very large Islamic city.

Arabian Origins

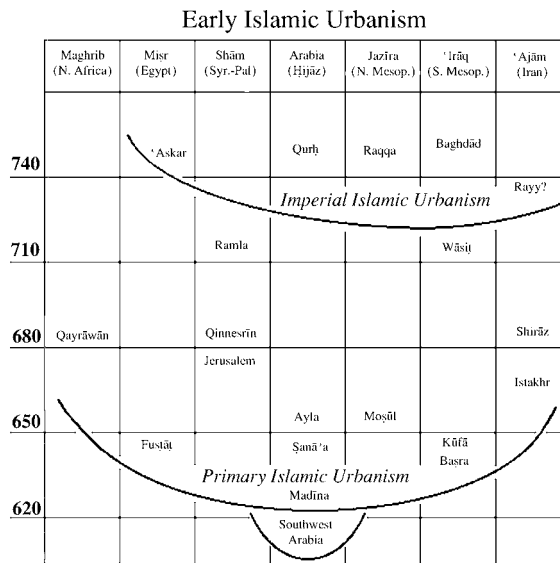
Evidence for an urban tradition in South Arabia was posited long ago and has found an increasing amount of archaeological support. This hypothesis was offered by Paul

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Wheatley as a challenge to archaeologists seeking the origins of the Islamic city:

“...new cities were founded, and it is among the earliest and largest of these, the so-called *amṣār*, that we might expect to discern, if anywhere, traces of Hijazi or more broadly Arabian urban traditions along with an incipient Islamic imprint.”¹

During a conference celebrating the work of Robert Braidwood some year ago, I constructed a sort of “dip-chart” which expresses the relationship of early Islamic urban foundations. The present research project has as its modest goal to augment the cities on this chart and, more importantly, delve into the structural and functional relationship implicit in this great urban tradition.



¹Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together*, pp. 263–69, including the “radical recent revisions” of Whitcomb, pp. 266–67.