

THE COLONNADED AXES OF THE CITIES OF THE DECAPOLIS AND SOUTHERN SYRIA IN THE ROMAN IMPERIAL PERIOD – ROMANIZATION OR LOCALIZATION?

Mr. ROSS BURNS
(Macquarie University, Sydney)

Except for Dura, our image of the classical cities of the East is that of the high Roman period. It is a picture of the application of varied solutions not rigid formulae with certain elements peculiar to the era. The most remarkable is the colonnaded street. Still today in the ruin fields of Syria, Palmyra, Apamea, Bosra, this is the feature that dominates the picture, leaving its mark on every major site.

[E. Will 1989: 241 – author's translation]

Purpose: An examination of the development of the colonnaded axes in the cities of the Decapolis and Provincia Syria seeking clues to the evolution of the phenomenon in the wider region of Syria-Asia Minor.

THE PROBLEM

Until a couple of recent studies,¹ the development of the colonnaded axis was the subject of several broad assumptions. Sauvaget's seminal studies of the 1930- and 40s² assumed that the city plans of most cities of the Roman East were superimposed on a core comprising a Hellenistic-era grid. The classic example was Latakia on the Syrian coast where the city's grid plan is still more strikingly evident in the modern street pattern than in any other living city of classical origins in the region. (Fig. 1 – Latakia, Roman remains) Sauvaget's studies of Damascus and Aleppo drew on the same conclusions about the sequence of urban development and are perhaps most celebrated for the now-classic theory on the degradation of the open spaces as they became encumbered in the Byzantine and Arab eras. On the origins of the colonnaded axes Sauvaget had no doubts: The cities began as Hellenistic colonial implantations, straightforward and practical in their layout, easily measured and

¹ Bejor 1999; Tabaczek 2002.

² Sauvaget 1934; Sauvaget 1935; Sauvaget 1941; Sauvaget 1949.

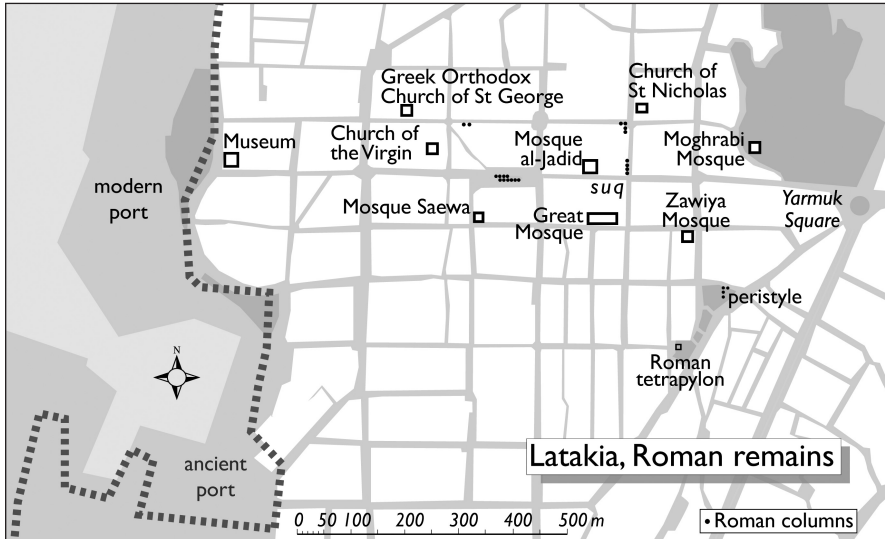


Fig. 1. Latakia, Roman remains.

expanded as needed by untrained military labour and so with no concessions to beauty and few to climate.³

All this changed with the Pax Romana. Initially all the Romans had to do was expand the cities as needed to accommodate their new facilities. Soon however the level of prosperity saw new ambitions arise – massive cult centres attracting worshippers from afar. This gave new inspiration to look at the cities as more than cantonments.

‘For the first time in their history, the Syrian cities could foresee their development unfolding in accordance with very clear principles – municipal legislation adopted along the lines of common guidelines including the search for mutual prosperity, aesthetic principles and an enforcement of law and order. There was now a push to develop urban planning: in contrast to the spontaneous development of previous times, there was an evolution based on clear directions.’⁴

As to the origins of the idea of orienting a city’s life around a major axis, the French experts (reflected also in Roland Martin’s study⁵) set the basic assumptions: the axial colonnaded street arose from the *stoa* in Greek architecture, was tentatively applied to a few stretches of public street (as opposed to sections of

³ On Hellenistic city plans Ernst Will put the assumption most directly – ‘No concession was made to monumental aspects: the streets, narrow with the exception of the main axis, served as paths running between blank walls.’ Will 1989: 228 (present author’s translation).

⁴ Sauvaget 1935: 440.

⁵ Martin 1956: 176-85.

a sanctuary or to a market area) in first century AD Greece and Asia Minor but had to wait until second century Syria before it took off in a major way. In the middle of this two-century period of gestation, literary sources (mainly Josephus) tell us that the main street of Antioch – the intra-urban section of the main road leading from Aleppo and terminating at the port of Seleucia – was paved and perhaps colonnaded by the Judaeen client ruler, Herod the Great.⁶

This means that we are faced with a gap of several generations between this first adoption of the colonnaded street in its most spectacular form – an avenue running all the way across a city, the ‘armature’ around which all aspects of the city’s life revolved – and the general rush to adopt it as the acme of urban prestige in the second century AD.

Ancient Name	Modern Site	Colonnaded Street?	Length	Date
Abila	Quwailibeh	no evidence of colonnading but stretch of limestone north-south paving attributed to Romans	grid covering up to 300 m	unknown
Canatha	Qanawat	evidence of a principal north-south street but no indication of colonnading	up to 350 m	2 nd century?
Capitolias	Beit Ras	<i>decumanus</i> with triple gate	c 450 m	unknown
Damascus	Damascus	<i>decumanus</i> ; <i>agora</i> -temple axis – both colonnaded 1300 / 650 m		?rebuilt 2 nd century
Dion	?Tell al-Ash’ari	no evidence		
Gadara	Umm Qeis	<i>decumanus</i> with four monumental gates (only western-most has triple passage)	c1100 m (with extensions)	1 st (?) – 3 rd century

⁶ Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* XVI, 5, 3 (148); *Wars of the Jews* I, 21, 11 (425).

Ancient Name	Modern Site	Colonnaded Street?	Length	Date
Gerasa	Jerash	<i>cardo</i> in three sections	1200 m	1 st (?) – 4 th century
Hippos	Susitha	<i>decumanus</i> , no evidence of colonnade in section near forum	650 m	2 nd – 3 rd century
Pella	Tabaqat Fehl	no evidence		
Philadelphia	Amman	<i>cardo</i> & <i>decumanus</i> , evidence of colonnading	c 1400; 600 m	Antonine?
Scythopolis	Beit Shan	4 sections	max 250 m	2 nd century

Most of the cities of the Decapolis followed the general pattern in Syria of adopting the colonnaded axis in the second century AD. It is assumed that by then the term Decapolis had no political significance and that the cities of the league had been absorbed into the provinces of Syria and (after AD 106) Arabia. Though many were Hellenistic settlements, there is no evidence of their Greek layouts except for isolated features such as the Zeus Temple and early city walls of Umm Qeis, an enclosure wall on the central forum at Hippos and, it would seem, recently identified remains at Qanawat (Canatha).⁷

In most cases we have no archaeological evidence that the cities' axes were developed before the second century AD. A possible exception is Jerash. In Kraeling's study of Gerasa, the first version of the central *cardo* is dated to the last quarter of the first century AD though it was accepted that the colonnades might have been a little later. The excavators of Jerash believed that parts of the long *cardo*, notably the middle sector between the oval piazza and the north tetrapylon, were reconstructed on a grander scale later in the second century. Some elements of the earlier *cardo* including its Ionic capitals were re-cycled in other projects, notably the north *cardo* and the north *decumanus*.⁸

If these dates are correct, then we have the first evidence from the Decapolis of a major monumental *cardo*, albeit one which was to be considerably enhanced by rebuilding later. No other centre in Syria gives us such indications (with one possible exception to be examined later). Why did the idea suddenly take hold, possibly two generations or more after the first precedent in Antioch?

⁷ See below and Freyberger 2005b.

⁸ Kraeling (ed.) 1938: 43.

Few works have examined this gap or sought to explain it in terms of the creative processes that led to the spread of the *cardo* in a relatively prescribed area of the Roman Empire. The recent study by Bejor of the colonnaded street phenomenon is cautious on this issue and is careful to cover all possibilities.

- Was it possible that Antioch was not the first colonnaded axis crossing a whole city?
- Could Herod's project have copied some model which is now lost to us, a victim of the frenzy of Roman rebuilding of the second and third centuries?⁹

If Antioch (See Fig. 2 – Antioch, Roman remains) was a one-off project it might be explained by several exceptional advantages the city enjoyed:

- the configuration of the city with its elongated north-south ribbon development crammed between Mount Silpius and the fickle course of the Orontes
- the resources the city drew on as the capital of the huge province of Syria
- the availability of a wealthy sponsor, Herod, not likely to be daunted by the scope of a program to monumentalise a stretch of road more than two kilometres in length; and finally
- Herod's desire to ingratiate himself in spectacular ways, this time by making Antioch the ultimate showpiece of the benefits of Empire.¹⁰

To this I would add a fifth consideration (which is partly allowed in Bejor's survey). Was the great axis at Antioch really the sort of colonnaded *grand projet* that is often assumed? Was our understanding of what it involved conditioned more by the later examples we see in Apamea, Palmyra or Bosra and of course by Libanius' euphoric description of his fourth century city?¹¹

Lassus' long-delayed report on the excavations in Antioch in the 1930s (published 1972) is painstaking in its recording of detail but reluctant to draw too many conclusions on evidence that was frustratingly confused and incomplete due to the extreme depth of the trial trenches across the *cardo* and the turmoil created by successive wars, earthquakes and huge mudslides not to forget the extensive destruction of previous occupation layers in the process of rebuilding.

So what should we make of Josephus' claim? – '*for the Antiochians, the inhabitants of the principal city of Syria, where a broad street cuts through the place lengthways, (Herod) built cloisters along it on both sides, and laid the open road with polished stone, and was of very great advantage to the inhabitants.*'¹²

⁹ Bejor 1999: 18.

¹⁰ Two recent studies examine Herod's building program and its motivations – Roller 1995, Netzer (ed.) 2006.

¹¹ On late antique Antioch, Saliou 2005.

¹² Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* XVI, 5, 3 (146).

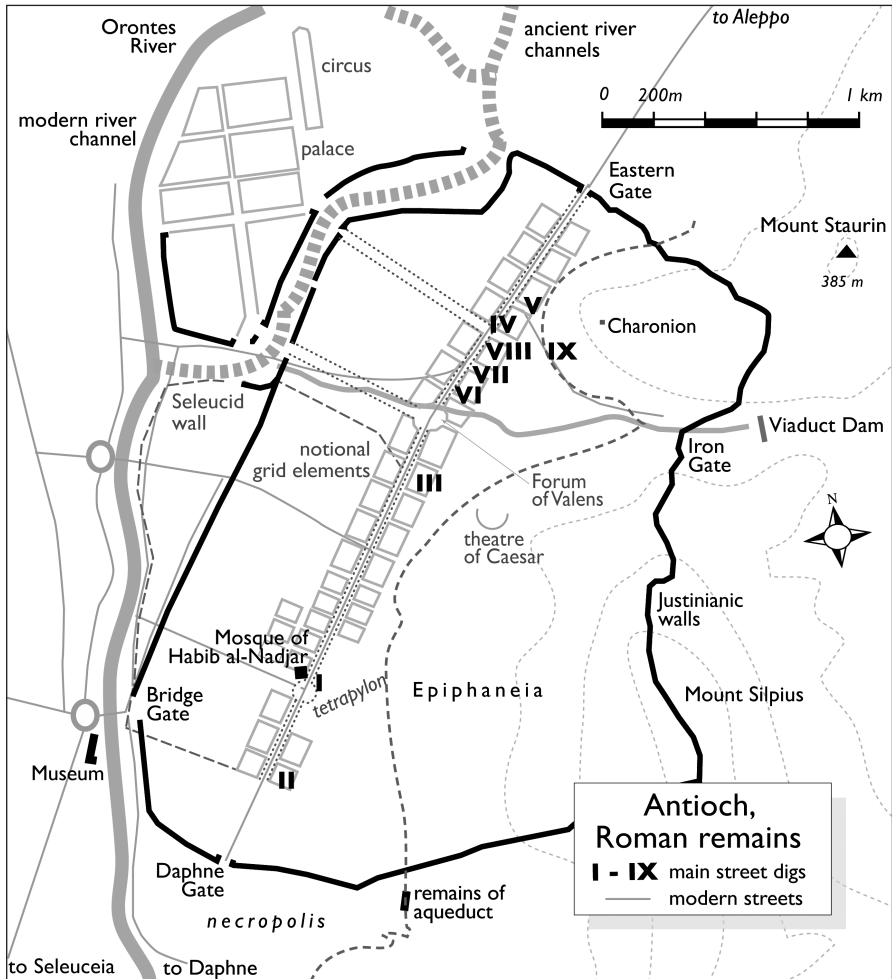


Fig. 2. Antioch, Roman remains.

Lassus interprets this very broadly and concedes that the paving and colonnading over two kilometres in length was such a massive project that it may not have been completed until decades after Herod's initial undertaking.¹³ Perhaps, in fact, Herod's program was confined to the paving to provide a hard surface needed to address the main problem of the thoroughfare, its intense exposure to water rushing from the flanking mountains and making its way across the previously pebble-encrusted street, turning it into a muddy obstacle course.

¹³ Lassus 1972: 145.

Additional rain protection may have come from wooden porticos between the cross streets that gave the impression of a *stoa* on each side, not necessarily continuous and not in their later splendid form.

Lassus informs us that the street may not have been colonnaded (at least not with stone-built porticos) until Tiberius and Claudius were forced to consolidate further the work of Herod in the following decades. Lassus was certainly confident that the broad colonnaded thoroughfare that inspired such rhapsodies from Libanius was not put in place until the second century, after the tremendous earthquake of 115 which Hadrian himself was caught up in while visiting Antioch.¹⁴

If the Antioch scheme took so long to complete in a form that through trial and error required increasingly permanent materials to withstand the ravages of Antioch's climate and perilous location, this would go a long way to explain why the idea did not take hold in other cities of the region for another hundred years after its first trial version. The fact that there was no viable model until the Antioch experiment was perfected would account for the fact that no other cities of the region seems to have adopted the device until well into the second century.

SOUTHERN SYRIA AND PALESTINE

But why was it then so suddenly and so extensively adopted? As we can see from the pattern in the Decapolis, it clearly became the fashionable device in all centres where geography allowed scope for an elongated axis crossing a city – often cut up into segments but still offering a vista that underlined the cities' new monumental *éclat*.

If we catalogue quickly the Decapolis cities, the following remarks are relevant:

Abila – though there is evidence of streets that clearly form some sort of grid plan, particularly an east-west axis leading up to a *propylaeum* that marked the ascent to Tell Abila, but the rest of the pattern is fragmentary. A short stretch of limestone-paved street running north-south was exposed but with no indication of colonnading.¹⁵

Adraha – modern Dera'a is a most interesting new element. Recent Syrian excavations in the area of the theatre have exposed a short stretch of east-west street with clear evidence of colonnading. By association with the theatre, the street is probably second or third century.

¹⁴ Lassus 1972: 142-146 summarises the confused and fragmentary evidence of the building sequence.

¹⁵ Chapman 2006 for the most recent summary.

Canatha or Qanawat is an early example of the process of ‘Romanization’. Recent German research does not touch directly on the issue of a north-south *cardo* but does bring out that the monumentalization of the town was clearly underway very early, probably in the first century BC, to which date the two temples of the Seraya complex, the peripteral temple to Rabbos and even the odeon and *nymphaeum* down in the valley, are ascribed.¹⁶ There was another later phase (late second century AD?) as indicated by the *spolia* incorporated when the Seraya temple complex was turned into a centre of Christian pilgrimage. As was often the case, the complex echoed the continuity of pilgrimage which in the case of Canatha was initially associated with the late Hellenistic-Roman complex at Si’a 3 kilometres away.

At **Capitolias** the Jordanian authorities have excavated the Roman theatre.¹⁷ The village’s main street was clearly the ancient *decumanus* as indicated by Schumacher’s plan.¹⁸ Part of a double gateway survived west of the mosque at the time of his visit in the 1880s.¹⁹

Damascus will be covered later. **Dion** though now assumed to be Tell Ash’ari west of Dera’a, currently being studied by a Syrian archaeologist, has not yet yielded any reported architecture.²⁰

At **Gadara** (Umm Qeis), Hoffman reports only fragmentary evidence of a city grid plan from Hellenistic, Hasmonaeon or Pompeian times.²¹ The city, however, seems to have spread from the original citadel hill to the west and southwest. The main axis joined the road coming in from Tiberias. (A second route, perhaps economically more important as inter-regional trade developed, came in from the coast via Scythopolis and Pella and met the *decumanus maximus* at the site of the later ‘podium monument’.) This new east-west axis seems to have been developed from the early imperial era and took the early Roman city into a massive expansion away from the original settlement on the citadel hill. We can trace its first development as it forged a route leading directly westwards from the *propylaeum* of the Hellenistic Zeus Temple, skirting the citadel hill and providing the northern limit of the terrace housing the first phase of development on the site of the later basilica church complex. The existence of remains of four city or extra mural gates along this axis are part of a complex building sequence for the *decumanus*, details of which are still to be fully unravelled. On present published evidence, the first stretch of true colonnaded street was actually outside the Early Imperial West Gate completed as part

¹⁶ See website of the DAI Abteilung Damaskus – http://www.dainst.org/index_8337_en.html (accessed Dec 2008). For an earlier summary, Freyberger 2005b.

¹⁷ al-Shami 2005.

¹⁸ Schumacher 1890: opposite page 155.

¹⁹ Schumacher 1890: 157-8.

²⁰ On location, Sartre 1992.

²¹ Hoffman and Bührig 2000: 210.

of the Roman defensive works though this sector was soon swallowed by the built-up area particularly when the freestanding Tiberias Gate was erected shortly afterwards. Evidence from this area has not been fully published but it is possible that this could give us an example of a colonnaded street dating from before the end of the first century.²² Most of the rest of the long axis, however, dates from the second and third centuries that also saw the upgrading of the initial work within the first West Gate.

Hippos is currently being excavated by Haifa University in conjunction with a Polish team.²³ A long west-east axis joins the eastern gate to the central forum but the extent to which it might have been colonnaded, either wholly or in part, is not clear. According to the excavators, the Hippos forum may have been colonnaded at the same time as that at **Philadelphia** (Amman). Hadidi ascribed that work to the same program of monumentalization as the Antonine *propylaeum* that gave access to the Temple of Hercules on the hill above.²⁴

The view of Kraeling, noted above, that the **Jerash** *cardo* was originally undertaken in the last quarter of the first century AD has been debated. The Australian excavations at the intersection of the *cardo* and the north *decumanus* tended to bear out Kraeling's assumption in dating the earliest work on the *cardo* but noted that 'the (*cardo*'s) street colonnades ... were presumably added sometime later, perhaps in the last years of the first century or early years of the second'.²⁵

At **Pella**, nature has not been kind to the remains of the classical city in the Wadi Jim below the Bronze Age mound. The terrain hardly allows for a stretch of colonnaded street of any length. A short section may lie under the mud and stones brought down the wadi over the last 1800 years though the modern water table has made access impossible.

At **Scythopolis** the terrain also allows for only short stretches of colonnaded street but the device is used to the maximum as part of the program of monumentalization of the main thoroughfares in the second and third centuries AD.²⁶

²² Bührig 2008 I: 182 (note 1250) remains cautious on the early dates proposed in initial excavation reports. An unpublished capital found in the area (though not necessarily identified with the colonnading) is said to be Flavian (Thiel 1999: 3).

²³ Segal 2005.

²⁴ Hadidi 1970: 85. See also Hadidi 1974; Hadidi 1978.

²⁵ Ball (*ea*) 1986: 386. Kraeling (1938: 43) had also noted that 'when their paving and the construction of the colonnaded porticoes ... was undertaken is still uncertain'. For a critical re-examination of Kraeling's conclusions, Parapetti 1983-4. Tabaczek 2002: 167 supports Seigne's assumption (Seigne 1992: 340) that the northern *decumanus* was not initiated until AD 150-180.

²⁶ Tsafirir and Foerster 1997.

'ROMAN-NESS'

The sequence of monumentalization of the Decapolis cities thus largely follows their incorporation into the provinces of Arabia and Syria (after AD 106); it began apace soon after that date in most cases; and it adopted the Roman architectural canon with enthusiasm. There are, of course, other possible factors encouraging the trend.

- Was the concern for long vistas and symmetry an echo of ideas (also evident in architectural decoration) seeping into Syria from the Parthian east?
- Did it spring from the *dromos* leading up to temples of the Pharaonic period and still a favourite device under the Ptolemies?
- Was it not simply the Greek *stoa* duplicated on a massive scale?
- Was it a purely local adaptation of Roman urban improvement measures reflecting local exigencies of climate?

The difficulty is that all these factors may have played a role but the critical factor was the decision of a few eastern cities that chose to use this device to combine the spectacular (visually unifying the entire length of a city) with the practical (communication, shopping, social interchanges).

To answer the question 'Romanization' or localization', though, we need to take a comparative look at other cities of the area where the archaeological record is becoming more prolific. At Bostra, probably the late Nabataean royal capital and after AD 106 the headquarters of Provincia Arabia, we now know a lot more about the complicated sequence of building programs marking the city's transition from a Nabataean cult centre and capital to a showplace of 'Roman-ness'. This is formidably documented in the new IFPO 'guide' to the city.²⁷ Perhaps surprisingly we discover that the still impressive Bostra main street is quite late. The mid-second century South Baths were aligned to the version of the street which pre-dates the Severan improvements to the *decumanus* and are thus at an angle to the later colonnades. The shops were not added until the sixth century, cutting into the bath's entrance portico.

In Jean-Marie Dentzer's view: '*Instead of founding a new city, the Roman Empire inherited an agglomeration onto which it had to overlay its own image. The colonnaded street added a monumental dimension to an urban spread of mixed ancestry, often broken up and even poorly conceived*'.²⁸ This, of course, was the case in many cities including the Decapolis members but the challenge at Bostra was probably complicated by the need at the same time to house and provide the necessary facilities (including extensive baths) for the legion based on the northern edge of the town.

²⁷ Dentzer-Feydy 2007.

²⁸ Dentzer, : 63-4 – present author's translation.

Was there any resistance to this process of providing a Roman stamp? It is hard to find any after the end of the first century. In the first full century of the Roman presence, as Jacqueline Dentzer-Feydy has pointed out in a thoughtful article, a complex interplay had oscillated between eastern and western influences: ‘*We can assume that in the environments of inland Syria and of Mesopotamia, parallel developments took place with local variations on a common decorative tradition partly derived from Hellenism but separated from its sources and as yet untouched by imperial influences in areas separated from the provincial capital*’.²⁹ While the local style was once misleadingly labelled ‘Nabataean’, we are now aware of other influences including in some areas the seepage of ideas (through Petra) from Ptolemaic and Roman Alexandria.³⁰ In Dentzer-Feydy’s view what was happening in the south was that the Romans still saw the area as a sort of buffer zone where ideas were free to mix until the full takeover the next century touched off a much more explicit search for ‘Roman-ness’.

The temple complex at Si’a shows the many strands involved when this process began. At the end, by the late second century, there were still some elements of a mixture in southern Syria but the main ideas were Roman and the colonnaded axis was the driving logic behind many of the urban improvements. This sorting out process may also explain why there had to be a gap between the first try-out of the colonnaded axis in Antioch and its wide adoption in the mid-late second century.

We know from the building record in several major centres (Palmyra, Damascus, Baalbek, Jerash, Jerusalem) that the emphasis in the first days of the Pax Romana was on massive projects of a religious nature, for example the Bel Temple in remote Palmyra. These projects cleverly combined religious pilgrimage with commerce as indicated by the extensive assembly areas around the cult centres often clearly associated with commercial ends. Such projects, usually funded by local benefactors – and, as Ted Kaiser has pointed out in the case of Palmyra, ‘not as part of an imperial propaganda campaign’³¹ – underline the surge in prosperity which in most areas followed the Augustan peace. There was not the same level of investment in purely civic institutions until the second century AD.

The exceptions were the projects directly funded by the Judaeen client king, Herod the Great. His munificence went beyond religious centres with an emphasis on buildings that encourage Hellenistic or Roman civic values. Interestingly for our purposes, his colonnaded street at Antioch was not

²⁹ Dentzer-Feydy 1986: 277.

³⁰ On Alexandria’s influence, the seminal study is McKenzie 2005, now followed up by McKenzie 2007.

³¹ Kaiser 2002: 71.

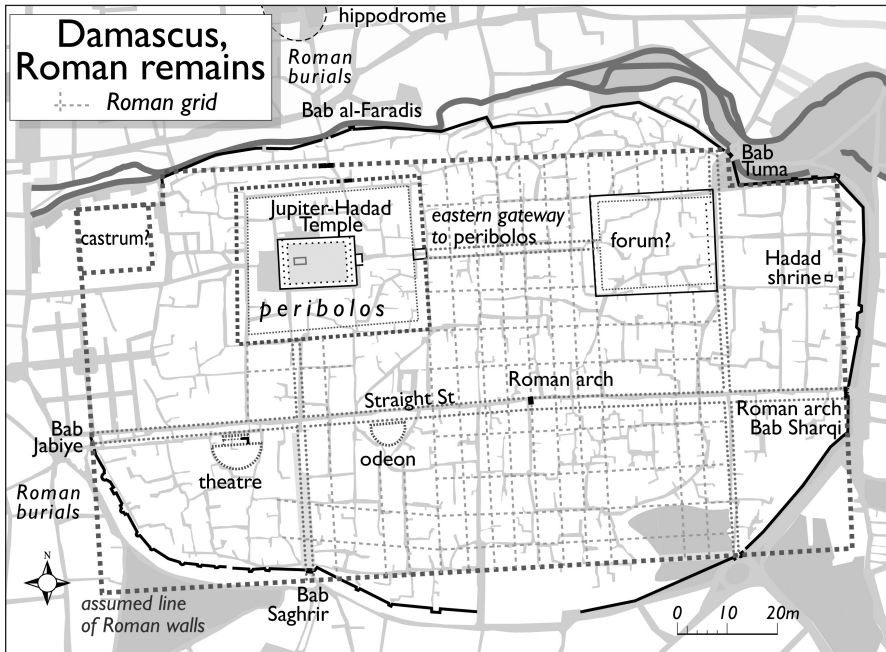


Fig. 3. Damascus, Roman remains.

repeated in any other projects listed throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Not even close to home in Caesarea Sebaste did he try out the idea.³²

DAMASCUS

The final element that may be relevant in finding a thread linking the *cardo* projects is Damascus, often seen as the gateway to the process of ‘Romanization’ in southern Syria and the Decapolis and in this role perhaps included by Pliny as an honorary member of the grouping.³³ (Fig. 3 – Damascus, Roman remains) We have good epigraphic evidence that the great Temple of Hadad-Jupiter was massively rebuilt in the early Imperial period.³⁴ We

³² Columnaded streets (*decumani*) were not adopted until the second century when the city was greatly expanded to the southwest – Porath 1996: 112-3.

³³ Pliny *Natural History* V, 18, 74.

³⁴ Burns 2005: 61.

know from Josephus³⁵ that Herod around this same time endowed two civic buildings in Damascus, a theatre and a gymnasium, again chosen because it would please the Romans to endorse their Hellenising agenda. He may also have taken his cue from Augustus' program of building and restoration in Rome.

Until recently there had been no recognised remains of the theatre though the astute Wulzinger and Watzinger³⁶ and later Sauvaget³⁷ had long ago detected a section of the city street pattern south of the western end of the city's *decumanus maximus*, the famed Via Recta or Straight Street of the New Testament, which could disguise its presence.

In the 1990s, the Danish Institute in Damascus converted a Mamluk-Ottoman house lying just below the western end of Straight Street to serve as its headquarters.³⁸ In the painstaking process of researching the building, remains were found that have been identified as part of the side and back walls of the stage of the Roman theatre, exactly in the spot where the French and German experts had deduced its presence.³⁹ What is relevant in the present context is the alignment of the theatre in relation to Straight Street.

Figure 3 above shows the Roman remains identified in Damascus. Note the long stretch of Straight Street (Via Recta) crossing the southern part of the city. From the alignment of the street to the Roman triple arch surviving at the eastern end of the street we are conscious that the Roman thoroughfare was a good deal wider than the present road that barely has room for one line of traffic. At the western end of the *decumanus*, the ancient path is covered not only by Straight Street itself to the north (Suq Midhat Pasha) but by the narrower *suqs* (Suq al-Qutn and Suq al-Suf) following the same alignment to the south on which the Beit 'Aqqad is located. Together the two lines of streets probably occupy the breadth of the ancient axis.

Figure 4 is based on the detailed plan prepared by the Danish architect responsible for overseeing the project, Tom Flemming Nielsen.⁴⁰ In his study of the theatre, Nielsen has taken an idealised theatre and applied it to the segment of walls found in the house overlaid on the city's street pattern. While the overall plan of the theatre can be seen only as notional, there are two things that are firm – the alignment of the stage rear wall and the separation from Straight Street (Via Recta).

³⁵ Josephus *Wars of the Jews* I, 21, 11 (422).

³⁶ Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 44.

³⁷ Sauvaget 1949: 350-5.

³⁸ Mortensen (ed.) 2005.

³⁹ For an expert view – Freyberger 2005a: 181-202.

⁴⁰ Nielsen in Mortensen (ed.) 2005: 203-26.

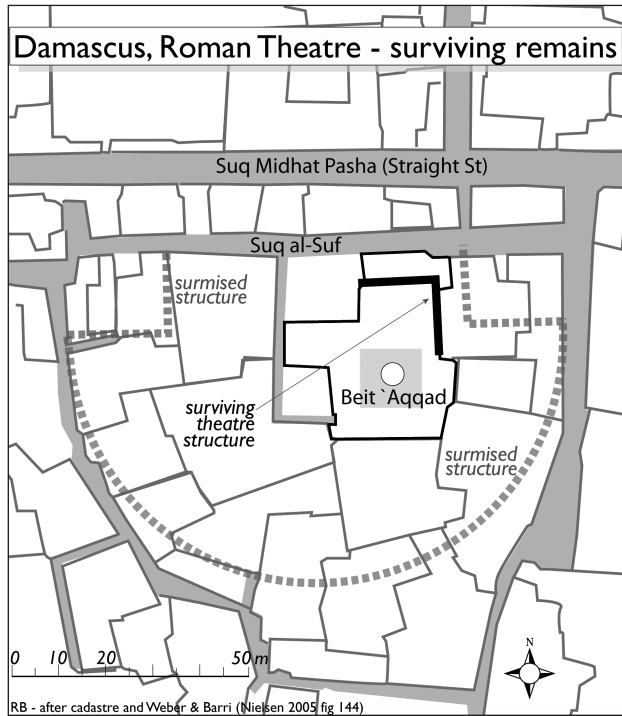


Fig. 4 – Damascus, Roman theatre.

The alignment of the rear wall of the stage, which corresponds with the alignment of the section of Suq Midhat Pasha (27 metres to the north), allows two interesting conclusions.

- It is highly probable that the theatre abutted directly onto the Via Recta, probably extended into this part of the city only in the early Roman period
- Its alignment broadly corresponds with today's Straight Street, which from here extends to meet the city's western gate.

The gate at the western end of the Via Recta, today Bab Jabiye, was rebuilt under Nur al-Din (mid 12th century) but the material is taken from the Roman gate on the site and the present opening occupies the southern passage of the original triple archway – Fig. 5 – Damascus, western end of Straight St.⁴¹ The present line of Straight St at its western end clearly flexes north of the original alignment probably as a result of the extensive reconstruction of the area under Midhat Pasha after a disastrous fire in 1860. If the southern opening of the

⁴¹ Braune 1999: 71; Sack 1989: 15.

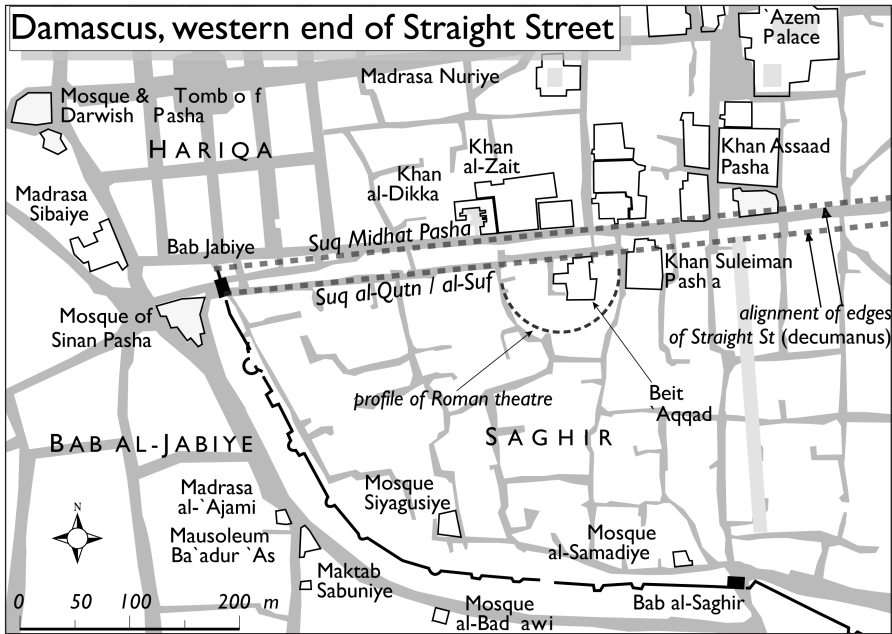


Fig. 5. Damascus, western end of Straight St.

western arch is taken as the more accurate gauge of the gate's position and thus the street's western end-point, the street's classical course aligns precisely with the northern wall of the theatre structure.

This alignment is consistent with a broad Straight Street, which allowed for a central vehicle thoroughfare and with pedestrian passages (possibly colonnaded) each side.⁴² The theatre can be dated to the Herodian period, possibly forming part of an extension of the city to the west under Augustus to provide a new area for the city's Roman institutions.⁴³ The discovery of the theatre – and most critically, its alignment – thus raises the possibility that even in the Augustan period, Damascus had been endowed with a cross-city thoroughfare whose grand dimensions correspond with the triple archways whose remains survive in part at the centre and eastern end of the Via Recta.

⁴² Nielsen in Mortensen (ed.) 2005: 203-26 gives a most interesting reconstruction of the theatre's footprint as well as detailed plans on which my more impressionistic sketch is based. Though there is no physical evidence for his colonnaded sidewalks, such an arrangement would be consistent with the way in which the theatre is integrated into a cross-city axis of these dimensions.

⁴³ The date of the theatre remains is analysed by Freyberger in Mortensen (ed.) 2005: 187-8. On the Roman implantations including an odeon, possible gymnasium and baths in this area, Burns 2005: 54-5.



Fig. 6. Damascus, Bab Sharqi from west (photo R. Burns).

Was Straight Street, then, colonnaded as early as Antioch? A second important clue is the dating of the eastern arch, Bab Sharqi. The only study of this monument (restored in the early 1960s by the Syrian authorities), apart from the original engineer's report,⁴⁴ is by Klaus Stefan Freyberger. Freyberger ascribed the arch as seen today to the late second century on the basis of pilaster capitals on what is otherwise a fairly plain façade. He allowed, however, the possibility that the gate had originally been constructed in the Augustan period.⁴⁵ He was also confident that the colonnade whose remains still stand within the gate was Augustan on the basis of the 'Doric-style' capitals.⁴⁶ The plainness of the gate gives us few clues to its dating (Fig. 6 Damascus, Bab Sharqi from the west). It has also been extensively reconstructed with the addition of much new material though the rebuilding appears to be consistent with pre-1960 photographs of the monument. If it is Severan it is remarkably sober for its era. Freyberger's dating initially used a comparison with gates in Augustan Italy⁴⁷ but perhaps a better gauge is the triple gateway to the shrine at Isthmia near Corinth in Greece that is dated (by Tim Gregory and Harriet Mills) to the first century AD.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Mufti 1966 16: 29-36.

⁴⁵ Freyberger 1999: 127-8.

⁴⁶ Freyberger 1999: 128.

⁴⁷ Freyberger 1999: 127.

⁴⁸ Gregory and Mills 1984: 407-45

Without adequate archaeological intervention, none of this can be resolved but there is sufficient evidence in my view to indicate that there may be a colonnaded street that helps bridge the gulf between Antioch and the second century cities of Syria and Asia Minor. That would explain too the enthusiasm for the prototype in southern Syria given Damascus' role as a gateway for imperial ideas. The opportunity for such intervention would be the present works to upgrade the water conduits along the length of Straight Street. This extensive operation has unearthed a considerable amount of material which confirms that at least the eastern half of the street was indeed colonnaded on a sumptuous scale, consistent with the width of street imagined by Wulzinger and Watzinger and by Sauvaget. The size of the column drums is impressive (at least 85 cm in diameter) and the Attic bases seem consistent with the style common throughout the Levant (second century, if not earlier) and with the bases just inside Bab Sharqi. If the huge scale of the recently unearthed material indicates a later (second century) phase of colonnading, that would not, of course, rule out an earlier date for an initial project whose spacious configuration matched the apertures of the original eastern gate before its refurbishment.

To conclude, there is no doubt that the idea of an extended colonnaded axis striding across even minor cities of the Roman East was an idea which, whatever its possibly varied origins, took off after a long period during which the Antioch example had been perfected. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to try to unravel how this profusion of a more 'imperial' style in the second century was made possible. We know, however, through the cities of southern Syria that the colonnaded street was seen as a way in which many cities established their sophistication, paid tribute to Roman values and harnessed the generosity of individual citizens who wished to express their appreciation for the stability that Roman rule had brought. It became the indicator of the cities' levels of prosperity, supplementing the great cult centres that, largely through the generosity of local patrons, had marked the opening phase of the Pax Romana building program and which had often contained a more conscious blend of eastern and western influences. Finally they were a gesture through which an Emperor could convey his particular favour towards a city, for example Septimius Severus' costly upgrading of Latakia and Tyre to reward those cities for supporting his cause in the 193 civil war.

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