CHAPTER 2

Formation of the Şâlihiyya Quarter in the Northern Suburbs in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods

Historical Importance of the Şâlihiyya Quarter

Egypt and Syria underwent rapid and remarkable urban development during the Ayyubid and the Mamluk periods when a large number of religious institutions (mosques, madrasas, sufi convents, and so on) and economic facilities (such as suq markets and caravansarais) were founded through waqf endowment. Urban growth extended beyond the city walls; in the case of Damascus, new suburban quarters such as the Shâghûr, Maydân al-Ḥaṣâ and Şâlihiyya quarters were formed. Numerous attempts have been made by scholars to show that the waqf endowment system prompted such urban development and that military elites such as the mamluks willingly endowed religious foundations to support the ‘ulama’ (religious and legal scholars). But little attention has been given to the actual process of formation of each urban quarter in the above-mentioned periods.¹

The urban quarters called ḥāra and mahalla have played important roles as units of daily life, administration and political activities. Information has been lacking, however, regarding both the external composition and the internal structure of the quarters in the Middle Ages, although several studies, utilizing field research, have been made into the internal structure of the quarters in the twentieth century.²


The twin purposes of this chapter are to examine the process of formation of an urban quarter and to reveal the external and internal structure of a quarter through a detailed analysis of the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter in the northern suburbs of Damascus.

The famous traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa described the development of suburban Damascus during his visit in 726/1326:

Damascus is surrounded on all sides except the east by suburbs (rabaḍ) of extensive area, the interiors of which are pleasanter than the interior of Damascus itself, owing to the narrowness which characterises its lanes. To the north of the city is the suburb of al-Ṣāliḥiyya, a great city [in itself], with a market (sūq) of unparalleled beauty, and containing a congregational mosque (masjid jāmiʿ) and a hospital. There is a madrasa there, known as the Madrasa of Ibn ʿUmar, which is endowed for the benefit of aged men and men of mature age who desire to learn the holy Qur’an, to whom, and to those who teach them, there is a regular issue of food and clothing sufficient for their needs (...) The inhabitants of al-Ṣāliḥiyya all adhere to the law school (madhhab) of the imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.3

The first thing we notice from Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s observation is that the development of the suburban quarters had already surpassed that of the inner city, as Ibn Jubayr had previously noted in 1184 (see Chapter 1, p. 4). Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 571/1176) mentioned in his topography of Damascus the names of three suburban quarters that existed in the latter half of the twelfth century: Qaṣr Ḥajjāj to the west of the Jābiya Gate, Shāghūr to the south of the Ṣaghīr Gate and ʿUqayba to the north of the Faraj Gate.4 Since they were all located near the city gates and along the main roads connecting Damascus with other cities, they were probably formed as an expansion of the walled city. By the time of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter in particular had grown so large that it had its own Jamiʿ, suq and a large madrasa, and was itself called a madīna (city). Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s assertion that all the inhabitants belonged to the Hanbali law school

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3 Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 1, pp. 229–230; H. A. R. Gibb tr., The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, 1, pp. 144–145. The English translation here is adapted from Gibb’s translation, with some revision by the author. The Madrasa of Ibn ‘Umar mentioned here was actually the ‘Umariyya Madrasa.

4 Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq: Qaṣr al-Ḥajjāj (pp. 92, 162); Shāghūr (pp. 79, 143, 161); ‘Uqayba (pp. 84–85, 161, 164). La Description de Damas: Qaṣr al-Hajjāj (pp. 48, 170, 276, 285); Shāghūr (pp. 148, 285); ‘Uqayba (pp. 153–154, 275–276, 283).