The subject of founded cities has application to the fairly extended period within which cities of major significance were created. As such, the present contribution deals not with any specific age but with social phenomena arising at moments of history that may be far distant from one another and may exhibit a variety of facets. Depending on the precise time they were created, these settlements are reflections of one or another dynamic (the Muslim conquest, for example, or the accession of a new dynasty) and are peopled by one or another type of society. Herein lie, already, initial elements of differentiation.

Since the topic of founded cities concerns the initial moment only, not the development of these cities down the centuries, we shall in each case limit consideration to a study of the original age or of successive foundations on the same site (the latter case permitting a study of these phenomena over a particular period of time)—even though these cities do, like other cities, develop from the point of view of population, functions, spatial organization, and so on. The first questions, therefore, are to establish what the founders’ urban project was and what appearance the city bore at that time. A further point is that the accession of a dynasty was often the occasion for the foundation of cities designed to act as capitals. The subsequent progress of the dynasty in question will obviously be crucial for the expansion of these particular cities.

Moreover, even if part of the monuments and the street network date from the original period of the cities under study, there is no question of searching for traces of hypothetical origins in these; it is not our purpose, therefore, to study the medinas and ancient quarters as they have come down to us.

There were, throughout history, so many cities founded by the Arabs that it would be an illusory exercise to try to make an exhaustive list, still more to attempt to consider them all. The aim here will simply be to bring out the different types of foundation, and, also, to provide a few short accounts concerning certain of these foundations—those that have, perhaps, most caught the imagination of later writers.
Thus, cities that turned out to have no future—like the city-camp of Jabiyya, the Umayyad city of 'Anjar, or the city-fortress of Qal'at Bani Hammad—left less impression on people’s minds than Kufa, Basra, or Baghdad.

We know the expansion of Islam took effect within highly urbanized lands, and that a certain number of cities there (Antioch, Aleppo, Damascus, Alexandria, and so on) were inherited from previous civilizations. In the earliest times, the conquerors—coming to these places with their mounts and their camels, and being organized into tribes unaccustomed to urban life—preferred other types of settlement, city-camps, which were more suited to their present social organization than the former cities in which they settled. Nevertheless as a sign that their first choice was not a mark of mistrust, they even chose one of these, Damascus, as the capital for their first dynasty. At the time of the Conquest, under the caliphate of 'Umar b. al-Khattab, Muslims had as supreme guide a man who remained in Arabia, and who issued orders regarding both small practical details and crucial decisions (the site of a provincial capital, for instance) through letters conveyed by mounts to troop commanders; nor had the Arabs yet assimilated the cultural characteristics of the civilizations they conquered. In the first decades they established themselves, therefore, in new settlements more adapted to most of the combatants’ way of life and more in accord with the expectations of the Medinan caliph. As for the first caliphs outside Arabia, the Umayyads, they opted for local continuity by choosing Damascus as their capital. Even so, they built small mansions for themselves in the Syrian Desert; domains where they lived with their attendants in their own way, hunting and enjoying worldly pleasures at a certain distance from the populations they governed. These foundations are not cities and will not, accordingly, be considered here.

Subsequently, Muslims both populated cities in existence before their arrival and founded urban centres of greater or lesser importance. It was often the accession of a new dynasty that provided the opportunity for these new foundations.

As with any subject of study, our knowledge of these cities is dependent on available documentation. For most of the cities in question, there are no contemporary texts for the initial era. Neither the foundations of the period of Muslim conquest nor those subsequent to it had any direct witnesses supplying accounts of facts and descriptions of