
Unlike Aleppo, which was a major commercial centre during the Ottoman period, Damascus was more linked to its hinterland. It also benefited from being the centre of the pilgrim caravan that departed annually to the Hijaz carrying about 15 to 20,000 pilgrims from Anatolia, the Balkans, and even Persia. The caravan generated much commercial activity in Damascus and its hinterland. To validate the newly-acquired title of the Ottoman sultan as Protector of the Two Holy Sanctuaries and to provide services to the pilgrims, *tekkes* (compounds of mosques and living quarters), mosques and *khans* (caravansaries) were built in Damascus to accommodate pilgrims and troops accompanying them. The mosques were built in the Rumi (Ottoman) style with pencil-shaped minarets that dominated the city's skyline and represented the core of Ottoman imperial architecture in the provinces.

The use of steamships in the nineteenth century made most pilgrims opt for travel by sea to the Hijaz because it was cheaper and safer. Damascus then lost the enormous revenue that accrued to it from the pilgrim caravan. At the same time, Damascus began to open up to the growing influence of industrial and revolutionary Europe, first during Egyptian rule in Syria in the 1830s and then through the application of the Ottoman European-style reforms known as the Tanzimat (edicts of reform). Damascus then began to shed away its conservatism and to undergo deep socioeconomic changes. The urban structure of the city was completely transformed in this process.

Studies about the impact of the political, economic and social conditions on urban planning in Ottoman Damascus are scarce. Stefan Weber’s work, therefore, is a major contribution to the field. His stated aim is to document the scope and character of the architectural, urban and social restructuring of Damascus in the last century of Ottoman rule and to understand the transformations of the city in its wider context. Weber has the linguistic skills, the training as an urban historian, and the ability to combine architectural evidence with textual sources which enabled him to comprehend the encounter between the established modes of urban structure and the need for change and adaptability in the built environment.

Weber begins his study with the year 1808 when the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) succeeded the murdered sultan Selim III, who was
the first reforming sultan but was opposed by the corrupt Janissaries and the conservative *ulema*. Sultan Mahmud succeeded in eliminating the Janissaries and containing the power of the *ulema*. The study ends in 1918 with the Ottoman withdrawal from Syria.

Weber discusses in volume 1, titled “Text”, the historical and cultural context of the built environment in Damascus. He focuses on the rupture that had occurred in the social and urban organization between the early modern and the modern era in which globalization, European imperialism, the greater speed of trade and communications challenged local economies, mentalities and social structures and changed cities around the world. He divides the volume into an introduction and three chapters. In the chapter titled “Protagonists of Change”, Weber gives an overview of the relations between the Ottoman state and Damascene society. He deals with centralization and Ottomanization and the strategies of Ottoman reform in Damascus. He also discusses the sources of urban and social development by highlighting the Damascene families who had successful careers during the time of the Tanzimat and who reflected their success and wealth by building sumptuous residences. Weber also speaks of the influence of European consuls and foreigners who constituted a new force in Damascene society.

In the chapter on “Witnesses of Change”, Weber discusses the Ottoman architectural history of Damascus. He underlines the institutions and organization of urban building with emphasis on the role of religious endowments (*vakıfs*/*waqfs*) and the authorities who were behind public works and urban development. He then elaborates on urban development in Damascus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by pointing to the emergence of new districts and the role of transport and infrastructures in their creation. Weber focuses on Marja Square and the building of government buildings there, such as the *Saray* (seat of government) and the City Hall (*al-Baladiyya*), and then discusses the building of the *Ghuraba* Hospital, also known as *al-Hamidi* Hospital, after Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) that was built toward the end of the nineteenth century. Other public forums include parks, cafés, theatres, and cinemas.

Weber also discusses the *suq* (bazaar) and bazaar streets, such as Suq Midhat Basha, called after Damascus governor Midhat Paşa (1878-1880) and also known as the Biblical Straight Street (Via Recta), where St. Paul walked after his conversion to Christianity. Weber also mentions Suq al-Hamidiyya, called after Sultan Abdülhamid II, which was formerly known as Suq al-Arwam, a reference to the Ottomans who had replaced the Byzantines to whom the early Arab Muslims referred as Rum. Other commercial