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**The Churches of Damascus according to Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 1176).  
The Destruction of the Church of St. John the Baptist by Caliph Walīd I**

**Abstract**

The Islamic commentators on the Damascus mosque from the eighth to the twelfth centuries demonstrated superiority of Islam to Christianity to reduce the influence of the earlier owners of the sanctuary, giving this holy place the exclusively Muslim meaning. The tradition recorded by Ibn ‘Asākir in his *Tārīḥ madīnat Dimašq* confirms this tendency. Although one can speak about some kind of tolerance in medieval Islam according to the researches of Yohannan Friedmann Muslims faced other religions from the position of a ruling power and were, therefore, able to determine the nature of that relationship in accordance with their world-views and beliefs. This phenomenon explains why from among 15 churches in the first part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Damascus in the 12<sup>th</sup> century there were only three churches used in the Christian cult, one was partially destroyed, seven were ruined and four were changed into mosques.

The most notable figure of the ‘Asākir family, Abū al-Qāsim ‘Alī Ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn ‘Asākir (1106–1176), known as Ibn ‘Asākir ad-Dimašqī, started his pursuit of religious education at a very young age.<sup>1</sup> Ibn ‘Asākir distinguished himself with his massive *Ta’rīḥ madīnat Dimašq*, historical work helpful to our understanding of the first five centuries of the Islamic history. The hadith master Ibn an-Nağğār (d. 980) said about Ibn ‘Asākir, that he was “the imam of hadith scholars in his time and the chief leader in memorization, meticulous verification, thorough knowledge in the sciences of hadith,

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<sup>1</sup> S.A. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir*, in: J.W. Meri (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia*, vol. I, New York–London 2006, p. 351.

trustworthiness, nobility, and excellence in writing and beautiful recitation. He is the seal of this science.”<sup>2</sup>

From the time of their birth in Mecca in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Islam and the Islamic world rapidly expanded outward. Three years after the death of Muḥammad in 635, Damascus was captured for Islam by Ḥālid Ibn al-Walīd (592–642), the great Muslim general, being the first city to surrender after the battle of the Yarmūk (636). After the murder of ‘Alī, the fourth caliph, his successor Mu‘āwiya transferred the seat of the Caliphate from Mecca to Damascus and thus commenced the dynasty of the Umayyads. In 661 AD, Damascus was made the capital of the empire that stretched from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus River basin and from south of France to west of China. Having ruled over Damascus for less than a hundred years, the Umayyad dynasty made a significant contribution to the cultural and artistic heritage of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Living in Damascus in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ibn ‘Asākir taught tradition during the Umayyad period. Under Nūr ad-Dīn’s patronage Ibn ‘Asākir composed several books but his *Ta’rīḥ madīnat Dimašq* is the largest work of history ever produced by medieval Muslim scholar.<sup>4</sup> His history shows how one Crusader-era Muslim perceived the formative centuries of his own religious and cultural community.<sup>5</sup> This treasure of the medieval Islamic historiography preserves substantial fragments from hundreds now-lost works written by historians and religious scholars before the time of Ibn ‘Asākir. The first two chapters of the *Ta’rīḥ madīnat Dimašq* concentrate on the sanctity of Damascus and its environments and present a list of the sites that made it holy.

### a) Christian Damascus

Christianity was introduced to Damascus shortly after the death of Christ. Syria played an important role in the early period of Christianity and its spread in Asia and Europe. Firstly, the important role of Damascus came with the Apostle Paul, who arrived in Damascus around 34 AD. Secondly, soon after the establishment of Christianity Damascus became an important centre of Christianity and its bishop used to be regarded as the most important ecclesiastical figure in Syria after the Patriarch of Antioch.

With the break-up of the Roman Empire in 395 AD, Syria became one of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Under the Constantinople rulers, Damascus maintained its economic, strategic and religious significance. To defend the Byzantine eastern border against the regular Persian attacks, the Byzantines fortified Damascus and turned it into military headquarters. The major construction in Damascus during the Roman era was the Temple of Jupiter. In the Byzantine times the great temple of Damascus was turned

<sup>2</sup> F. Haddad, *Ibn ‘Asakir*, at: [http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/ibn\\_asakir.htm](http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/ibn_asakir.htm), quoted on 14.04.2009.

<sup>3</sup> G.R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750*, London 2000; A. Miquel, *Islam et sa civilisation*, Paris 1977.

<sup>4</sup> S.A. Mourad, *Ibn ‘Asakir...*, p. 351.

<sup>5</sup> J.E. Lindsay (ed.), *Ibn Asakir and early Islamic History*, Princeton 2002.

into a Christian church by Emperor Arcadius (377–408). The Christian takeover of this temple meant the abolition of polytheism. The fact that the temple was located beneath the church was very important to the Christians as a remembrance of their victory over the old religion.<sup>6</sup>

Byzantine Damascus remained much the same as it had been during the Roman period, except for the mass constructions of churches and the transformation of the Temple of Jupiter into a cathedral dedicated to St. John the Baptist in the fourth century. Apart from this cathedral, 16 churches were built around Damascus. At the site where the Chapel of Ananias now stands, near the Eastern Gate, the Church of Al-Muṣallaba was built. The site was chosen because it was believed to be the place where St. Paul had been cured of his blindness after his vision on the road to Damascus. Two other churches were built in this area: the Church of Al-Maqṣallāt and the Church of Maryam, which was replaced by the Maryamiyya Church which still stands there today. There are descriptions of other churches, but no remains of them were found.<sup>7</sup> Damascus developed its own theological tradition, attracting such scholars as Sophronius (560–638), Andrew of Crete (650–740) and St. John of Damascus (676–749).<sup>8</sup> The supremacy of Christianity in Damascus lasted till the conquest of the city by the Muslims.

### **b) The demolition of the Basilica St. John the Baptist by the Umayyad caliph Al-Walīd I**

In 635 the process of Damascus' transformation into a Muslim city began. At the time of the Muslim conquest of Damascus, the main holy place in this city was the monumental basilica dedicated to St. John the Baptist. The church which had formerly stood on the site of Roman Jupiter's Temple, incorporated fragments from the previous monument, including a part of the *temenos* wall, i.e. the area reserved for worship. In the crypt-chapel the most precious holy relic of Damascus: the head of the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, who was also revered as a great prophet by the Muslims was placed. In the Arabs' world he was well-known as Yaḥyā Ibn Zakāriyyā<sup>9</sup>.

When Damascus was captured, it was agreed that the church would remain in the Christians' possession. According to the conditions established in the treaty of Damascus' from 635 the churches that remained in Christian hands could not later be commandeered

<sup>6</sup> E. Key Fowden, *Sharing Holy Places*, "Common Knowledge" 8/1 (2002), p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> J. Nasrallah, *Damas et la Damascène: leur églises à l'époque byzantine*, "Proche Orient Chrétien" 35(1985), pp. 37–58; 264–276; *Damascus in history*, <http://www.damascus-online.com/damascus.htm#Romans%20and%20Byzantines>, quoted on 14.04.2008; A. Shboul, *Change and Continuity in Early Islamic Damascus*, ARAM 6 (1994), pp. 67–102.

<sup>8</sup> D. Woods, *The 60 Martyrs of Gaza and the Martyrdom of Bishop Sophronius of Jerusalem*, in: M. Bonner (ed.), *Arab-Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times*, Aldershot 2005, pp. 429–450.

<sup>9</sup> E. Key Fowden, op. cit., p. 130.

for the Muslim use<sup>10</sup>. Nonetheless, from the early Islamic period in Damascus Muslims also worshipped within the *temenos* wall.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the religious policy of caliph 'Abd al-Malik (687–705), the reign of Al-Walīd was marked by some negative episodes for Christians. First at all, the Church of St. John, over which Christians of Damascus had disputed with 'Abd al-Malik, had been demolished at the orders of this caliph. Walid I ordered to built a new mosque on the site of the basilica.

Ibn 'Asākir narrated many traditions concerning the way Walid confiscated the Christian Basilica of St. John the Baptist and the Christian actions to preserve this church before it was demolished.<sup>12</sup> This compiled information with passages of other historians is useful to understand the reason for such a severe decision of Walīd.

We can find some explanation of this phenomenon in the Ibn 'Asākir's description of Damascus. He narrated the tradition that Muslims had not enough place to pray.<sup>13</sup> In addition to this information some scientists found the argument of the lack of place for praying as the inconclusive explanation because Muslims could build a mosque at the other place. It seems that the main reason for this action was to overshadow Christian culture by the Muslim mosque<sup>14</sup> what was attested by the Arabic writer and geographer Al-Muqaddasī (d. 988).<sup>15</sup> The Umayyad caliph Al-Walīd might have addressed to the Damascene populace the following words: "Inhabitants of Damascus, four things give you a marked superiority over the rest of the world: your climate, your water, your fruits, and your baths. To these I wanted to add the fifth: this mosque."

Christians and Muslims, for more than seventy years from 635 to 706, shared the courtyard of the Basilica of St. John.<sup>16</sup> Christians and Muslims worshipped there using the same *temenos*,<sup>17</sup> but the mosque was next to the church. The Medieval Arabic historians got their information from two different kinds of traditions. It is variously said that the

<sup>10</sup> [Futūh al-Buldān] *Liber expugnationis regionum, auctore Imamo Ahmed ibn Jahia ibn Djdbir al-Beladorsi*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Lugduni Batavorum 1866, p. 121; P.K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Druze People and Religion*, New York 1928, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup> F.B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus. Studies of the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*, Leiden 2001, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> *La description de Damas d'ibn 'Asakir*, ed. N. Elisséeff, Damas 1959, pp. 27–38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36; 60–61.

<sup>14</sup> J. Nasrallah, *De la cathédral de Damas à l'Islam*, in: *La Syrie de Byzance à l'Islam VIIe–VIIIe siècles. Actes du Colloque international Lyon-Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen, Paris – Institut du Monde Arabe 11–15 septembre 1990*, ed. P. Canivet, J.-P. Rey-Coquais, Damas 1992, pp. 139–144; K. Kościelniak, *Grecy i Arabowie*, Kraków 2004, pp. 92–93.

<sup>15</sup> *Aḥsan at-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm. La meilleure répartition pour la connaissance des provinces d' al-Muqaddasī*, ed. A. Miquel, Damas 1963, pp. 173–174.

<sup>16</sup> J. Nasrallah, *De la cathédral de Damas à l'Islam*, pp. 139–144; K. Kościelniak, *op. cit.*, pp. 92–93; J. Nasrallah, *Damas et la Damascène: leur églises à l'époque byzantine...*, pp. 41–49; R. Dussaud, *Le temple de Jupiter Damascénien et ses transformations aux époques chrétienne et musulmane*, "Syria" 3 (1922) pp. 219–250; J. Sauvaget, *Monuments historiques de Damas*, Damas 1932, pp. 13–15; K.A.C. Krewell, *A Short account of early Muslim architecture*, New York 1958, pp. 60–61.

<sup>17</sup> F.B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus...*, p. 2.

church was appropriated by force or by agreement. Some sources (for example Bar Hebraeus<sup>18</sup>) report that Christians accepted the decision of Al-Walīd and took money or some new place as recompense. The attempt to verify the historicity of these two traditions yet hundred years ago leads to a critical conclusion. Some authors doubted that the Christians sold or changed the basilica. Some traditions reported that Al-Walīd offered money to Christians and the information about the place in any other location of Damascus was added by some late authors. If Christians had accepted the caliph's proposal and had received the recompense, they would not have had the right to complain to 'Umar II about the forced capture St. John's church<sup>19</sup>. The majority of authors, including Ibn 'Asākir, reported that the basilica had been demolished without the consent of Christians. The poets in the Umayyad court, such as An-Nābiḡa a š - Š a y b ā n ī (d. 744) and A l - F a r a z d a q (641–730), celebrated the seizure of this church in their poems.<sup>20</sup> In addition to these historic passages some traditions say that Al-Walīd himself initiated the demolition by driving a golden spike into the church. On the foundations of the basilica of St. John was built a new mosque and its design resembled the house of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.<sup>21</sup>

### c) Churches of Damascus according to Ibn 'Asākir

When Ibn 'Asākir wrote his History in the late 'Abbāsīd period Damascus assumed a new role as a place of leisure, leading to the construction of palaces in the area. Like all the most successful city of the region Damascus was a commercial centre<sup>22</sup> that was much fragmented. The quarters were isolated and self-contained, each one developing its own markets, mosques and institutions for security reasons. Ibn 'Asākir counted more than 242 mosques within the city walls in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which was a direct effect of this fragmentation.<sup>23</sup> He presented 15 churches (including the basilica of St. John) in which the Caliph 'Umar (634–644) allowed Christians to gather and worship. Ibn 'Asakir's

<sup>18</sup> *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l Faraj*, translated from the Syriac by E. B u d g e, vol. I, Oxford 1932, p. 106.

<sup>19</sup> A. A h m e d o v, *The Umayyad caliphs and their non-Muslim subjects: Critical evaluation of religious policy of caliphs*, at: [http://zhurnal.lib.ru/a/ahmedov\\_a\\_s/theumayyadcaliphsandtheirnon-muslimsubjects/criticalevaluationofreligiouspolicyofcaliphs.shtml](http://zhurnal.lib.ru/a/ahmedov_a_s/theumayyadcaliphsandtheirnon-muslimsubjects/criticalevaluationofreligiouspolicyofcaliphs.shtml), quoted on 14.04.2009.

<sup>20</sup> *La description de Damas d'ibn 'Asakir...*, pp. 42–43; H. S a u v a i r e, *Description de Damas*, "Journal Asiatique" 3(1894/1896), pp. 192–193;

<sup>21</sup> K.A.C. C r e s w e l l, *Early Islamic Architecture*, 2d ed., vol. 1, Oxford 1969, pp. 151–196; R. H i l l e n b r a n d, *Islamic Architecture*, Edinburgh 1994, pp. 68–72; K.A.C. C r e s w e l l, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, Cairo 1989, pp. 46–73; F.B. F l o o d, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture*, Leiden–Boston–Köln, 2001; O. G r a b a r, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven–London 1973, pp. 104–38; B. F i n s t e r, *Die Mosaiken in der Umayyadenmoschee von Damaskus*, "Kunst des Orients" 7/2(1970–1), pp. 83–141.

<sup>22</sup> H. K e n n d y, *The early Abbasid Caliphate: a political history*, London 1981, pp. 22–23.

<sup>23</sup> *Damascus – description*, at: [http://www.archnet.org/library/places/one-place.jsp?place\\_id=1599&order\\_by=title&showdescription=1](http://www.archnet.org/library/places/one-place.jsp?place_id=1599&order_by=title&showdescription=1), quoted on 14.04.2009.

work was completed more than 500 years after the Muslim conquest of Damascus, so he did not only list the churches but also *gave* the information about their conditions. The author divided the Damascene churches that were in the southern and northern parts of the city<sup>24</sup> and described them as active or ruined.

Among the actively used churches Ibn 'Asākir lists firstly the Jacobite church located behind the jail, next to 'Alī market.<sup>25</sup> Secondly he mentioned the Melchite Church of St. Mary, at the place where the Greek-Orthodox Cathedral of Damascus stands now.<sup>26</sup> The next Christian sanctuary, which was partially destroyed, was named Humayd Ibn Durra. The author of *Tarīḥ madīnat Dimašq* specifies that Humayd's mother was Christian, the daughter of Abū Hāšim who was the uncle of Mu'āwiya Ibn Abī Suyfān. In the quarter called Bāb Tūmā, Ibn 'Asākir describes the second Jacobite church between the place of Ḥālīd Ibn Usayd Ibn Abī-'Āṣ and Al-Ġuhanī street.<sup>27</sup>

Without doubt the majority of the Damascene churches in the Ibn 'Asākir's description are ruined. Our author lists seven destroyed churches, the ruins of which he observed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The following churches were demolished: the church Maqṣallāt,<sup>28</sup> the church near sūq al-Fākiha,<sup>29</sup> the church near Zayn Ibn Abī Ḥakīm,<sup>30</sup> the church close to the Banū Laḡlāḡ's home,<sup>31</sup> the church Būlus (St. Paul),<sup>32</sup> the church Qalānis,<sup>33</sup> the church Al-Muṣallaba (St. Cross).<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the basilica of St. John, in the Ibn 'Asākir's list we find three churches that were changed to mosques: the church Al-Fūrnaq named mosque Abū al-Yumn and two churches of Al-'Ubbād, which historians have not indentified yet.

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One of the consequences of taking over the Christian holy place, the basilica of St. John, was the Islamization of its history. The Islamic commentators on the Damascus mosque from the eighth to the twelfth centuries demonstrated superiority of Islam to Christianity to reduce the influence of the earlier owners of the sanctuary, giving this holy place the exclusively Muslim meaning. For example, the tradition recorded by Ibn 'Asākir in his *Tarīḥ madīnat Dimašq* confirms this tendency. Namely, in the first part of the eighth century the traditionist Yazīd Ibn Maysara related the tradition that in the

<sup>24</sup> *La description de Damas d'ibn 'Asakir...*, p. 220.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

eyes of God there were four holy mountains: Jerusalem, Sinai, the mosque of Damascus, and Mecca<sup>35</sup>.

During Ibn 'Asākir's time the percentage of Christian in Damascus was much lower than during the times of the Umayyad dynasty. Four processes led to the Islamization of Syria in the demographic meaning: conversion to Islam, replacement of non-Muslims by Muslims through migration (especially during the Arab-Byzantine wars), some cases when Christians were persecuted and discriminated by the authorities<sup>36</sup> and intermarriages, which automatically gave birth to the second Muslim generation. Although one can speak about some kind of tolerance in the medieval Islam – according to the researches of Yohannan Friedmann – Muslims faced other religions from the position of a ruling power and were, therefore, able to determine the nature of that relationship in accordance with their world-views and beliefs.<sup>37</sup> This phenomenon explains why from among 15 churches in the first part of the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Damascus in the 12<sup>th</sup> century there were only three churches used in the Christian cult, one was partially destroyed, seven were ruined and four were changed into mosques.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 9–10; see: E. Key Fowden, *Sharing Holy Places...*, p. 131; M.J. Kister, *Sanctity Joint and Divided: On Holy Places in the Islamic Tradition*, "Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam" 20(1996), pp. 21–26.

<sup>36</sup> A. Ahmedov, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Y. Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: interfaith relations in the Muslim Tradition*, Cambridge 2006.