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The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

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Abstract:

French travelers to the Levant contributed significantly in the 19th century to the creation of a rich scientific material containing detailed information about the characteristics and features of the region, their writings were distinguished by comprehensiveness, precise observation, and they addressed all aspects related to the area. Among the prominent aspects explored by the writings of these French travelers was the architectural aspect of Damascus, which possessed a distinct and highly appealing aesthetic charm that captivated them, The city of Damascus stands out as one of the prominent cities in the Levant that received significant attention in these writings. Therefore, through this research, we will present an image of the city in the 19th century based on the observations of the French travelers.

Keywords: The Levant, Urbanism, Damascus, Backpackers, Century 19.

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Introduction

Arabs have been renowned since ancient times for their exquisite architectural sophistication, Their structures, which they left behind, continue to bear witness to this greatness and evolution, They established numerous major cities where they settled and established distinguished centers of civilization, Many of these cities still stand to this day Among them, Damascus stands as one of the most renowned cities in the Levant, preserving its historical and cultural landmarks up to the ,present.

The city experienced significant development across all fields due to its vital strategic location and its natural and human resources that made it an attractive hub, It has captured the imagination, especially that of the Western world, with its beauty, making it a focal point for various journeys, Foremost among these are the French expeditions, as numerous French travelers explored the region, particularly during the 19th century, The main reason for this was

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

the region's openness to European influences after the Ottoman Empire granted it various privileges and facilitations.

As a result, French travelers have left us a substantial literary and historical record about the region. Notably, their studies were characterized by precision and meticulous detailing in their documentation. They spared no effort in noting even the minutest details. Among the aspects that received significant attention in these writings was the architectural aspect. Thus, our choice of this topic aims to provide a detailed portrayal of Damascus architecture that mesmerized French travelers with its beauty and refined architectural style. The travelers' accounts transported us as if we were present in Damascus, and in reality, they achieved a remarkably high degree of realism.

This leads us to the main problem of the subject, which primarily investigates the extent to which French travelers during the 19th century were able to present an image of Damascus architectural style. From this standpoint, we pose subsidiary questions that we will attempt to answer, such as: What are the distinctive features of Damascus' architecture? Which architectural aspects did the travelers address in their writings?

The Damascene Houses:

The French travelers were enchanted by the charm and beauty of the city of Damascus, as we found in many of their books. Among them Louis Marquette, who was greatly impressed by the city and mentioned that it is one of the most beautiful cities on Earth. The reason behind this lies in its diverse natural and architectural components¹. Through the writings of these travelers, it's evident that in the 19th century, Damascus was one of the richest and most beautiful cities in the Levant². The traveler Jules Xavier described Damascus as the Pearl of the East, saying: "I found it beautiful, as poets have written about it..."³. From this, it can be said that Damascus held the foremost position in grandeur not only in the Levant but also in Asia, as noted by Father Jean Jacques Boissier.

Its beauty was further enhanced by its location amidst a countryside adorned with flowing rivers that enriched its soil fertility⁴. This aided the farmers in cultivating vast orchards and gardens⁵, creating an exceptionally picturesque view for the city. Most of what is cultivated within the city and its outskirts consists of fruit-bearing trees such as apples, apricots, almonds, and other trees

¹ Louise marquette, *attravers la syrie souvenir de voyage*, illustrations par m louis de goncourt, société de ainte augustin, lille, france1892, p252.

² La société des livres religieux de Toulouse, *le jeune voyageurs dans la Syrie l'Arabie et la prese*, société des livres religieuse, france1854, p151.

³ Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, *de damas a palmyre fragment inédit d'un voyage en orient*, l'imprimerie de bean, saint germain, france1848, p 09.

⁴ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, *la terre sainte voyage dans l'arabie pétrée la judée la samarie la galillée at la syrie*, ad mame et cie imprimeurs libraires, tours, france1860, p420.

⁵ La société des livres religieux de toulous, *op cit*, p148.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

that temper the climate¹, Due to the abundance of these surrounding trees, the French traveler Jules Xavier described the city as being enveloped in a vast forest, stating: "... it's a city surrounded by a massive forest with orange, pomegranate, walnut, apricot, and olive trees..."².

Moving to discussing the architectural characteristics of Damascene houses, beginning with their external appearance. Overall, it can be said that they possess a uniform architectural style, as they were coated with the same color, predominantly white³, The external construction is also marked by its simplicity and a consistent building pattern⁴, However as noted by the traveler L'Abbé Jean Jacques Bourassé, the external architectural style sometimes varies, There are houses in a dilapidated condition⁵, with an unappealing appearance, presumably owned by the poorer class or neglected due to the owner's death or disputes among heirs.

Damascene houses are constructed using stone or wood⁶, Jules Xavier mentions that the majority of houses have one floor, with only a few having two⁷, This possibly indicates a relatively similar living standard among most residents of the city, except for the wealthier classes who could afford an additional floor, Notably the windows in the city are not constructed like European homes, which have windows facing the street Instead, the side of the houses facing the street has only one window⁸, This design helps shield the houses from street noise and effectively insulates them from the summer heat⁹.

The simplicity evident in the exterior of Damascene houses does not accurately reflect their interior¹⁰, Edward Blondel's observation encapsulates this reality, as he describes in his journey: "... the decayed state of the houses we see from the outside does not at all reflect the wealth concealed within..."¹¹, The same sentiment is echoed by the religious mission of the city of Toulouse, stating: "... when you cross the threshold of this door, the interior will compensate for the poverty you observed from the outside..."

This sentiment is further supported by Jules Xavier, who states: "... the appearance of the houses from the outside¹³ seems miserable, but everything changes inside..."¹², Abbé Jean Jacques

¹ Edouard blondel, deusc ans en syrie et en palestine 1838-1839, chez p dufart libraire, paris, france1840, p150.

² Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, op cit, p 09.

³ Edmond de pressensé, le pays de l'évangile notes d'un voyage en orient, librairie de chmyrueis éditeur, paris, France 1864, p238.

⁴ Eugéne melchior de vogue, syrie palestine mont athos voyage ausc pays du passé, eplon et cie imprimeurs éditeurs, france1876, p77.

⁵ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p426.

⁶ Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, op cit, p34.

⁷ Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, ibid, p35.

⁸ La société des livres religieux de toulous, op cit, p152.

⁹ Eugéne melchior de op cit, p79.

¹⁰ Clara filleul de pétigny, les jeunes voyageurs en palestine, mégard et cie imprimeurs libraires, rouen, France 1852,p218.

¹¹ Edouard blondel, op cit, p167

¹² Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, op cit, p35.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

Bourassé also comments: "... in Damascus, you find the luxury of houses inside..."¹, where behind these modest facades lies one of the wonders of Eastern opulence², Consequently, it can be said that the interiors of Damascene houses were astonishing and surprising, as they transitioned from a simple exterior to a grandeur within"³.

The same applies to the houses of the wealthy, where you won't find a noticeable difference from the outside¹, From this we infer that the residents of Damascus invested all they had in achieving comfort within their homes, This can be attributed to several factors including:

- The desire to create a suitable indoor atmosphere for spending quality time with family.
- The need to provide facilities for women, who often stayed indoors throughout the day.
- The prevalent generosity and hospitality in the Levant in general, and Damascus in particular. This necessitated creating a welcoming environment for guests and ensuring their comfort.

Moving on to the details of Damascene houses from the inside, we start with the entrance of the house, characterized by its lowered door⁴, Edward Blondel describes it as follows: "... to enter, you must pass through low and narrow doors..."⁵, Damascene doors are made of wood with iron handles designed for knocking⁶, Immediately after entering, there is a somewhat dark and elongated corridor that leads to the courtyard of the house⁷.

At this point, the external image changes completely, as the courtyard is adorned with opulent decorations⁸, Through comprehensive examination of French travelers observations, it's evident that they were universally impressed by the Arab design⁹, Following the tunnel is a courtyard paved with various types of marble and planted with diverse trees such as oranges, lemons, roses, jasmine, apricots, pomegranates, and other fruit-bearing trees. In the center stands a fountain, exquisitely crafted and embellished with mosaics, All windows of the house open onto this courtyard. They are built in a style that allows air and water to circulate between neighbors¹⁰.

Water in the fountain never ceases, thanks to the excellent irrigation system owned by the city. Damascus is supplied by the Barada River, which provides around 1000 water channels, fulfilling all the water needs of the houses¹¹, The river also feeds all the wells in the city, and the fountains

¹ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p427.

² Clara filleul de pétigny ,op cit, p170.

³ Victor guerin, la terre sainte son histoire ses souvenirs ses sites ses monuments, 2ed, libraire plon, paris , France 1884,p414.

⁴ Eugéne melchior de vogue, op cit, p77.

⁵ Edouard blondel, op cit, p167.

⁶ Edouard blondel, op cit, p167.

⁷ M m p v, impressions et souvenirs deux soeur jumelles en voyage, societé de saint augustin, paris, france1895, p70.

⁸ Eugéne melchior de vogue, op cit, p73.

⁹ Edmond de pressensé, op cit, p234.

¹⁰ Jules xavier saguez de freuvry, op cit, p35.

¹¹ Eugéne melchior de vogue, op cit, p78.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

are supplied from its flow, This water source branches into three main parts, one leading directly to the city, and the other two flowing to the suburbs and farms surrounding Damascus. Numerous small channels branch from it, forming the fountains and water pumps, the water in Damascus is renowned for being pure and clear¹.

Adjacent to the courtyard is a somewhat elevated room known as the living room, favored by the residents of Damascus, especially during the summer due to its view of the fountain and green spaces that emit a pleasant fragrance², The living rooms are covered with soft, thick carpets, with sofas adorned with various types of embroidered silk cushions³, Internal apartments are spacious, mostly covered with marble. Shelves typically line the rooms, holding pottery items, The walls are covered with gypsum⁴, while the ceilings are painted in various water colors, providing a beautiful and vibrant ambiance to the house, In fact, Auguste Michelot mentions that everything inside Damascene houses brings joy and pleasure to the eye⁵.

Some of the most beautiful observations and impressions of admiration were recorded by the traveler L'abbé Jean Jacques Bourassé, and they go as follows: "...Wide courtyards, elegant arches, soft carpets, beautiful paintings, ceilings adorned with hanging ornaments, covered couches, richly embroidered silk fabrics, and precious vases – one can say that these houses are among the finest residences. They exude an air as if from the magical abode described in One Thousand and One Nights. The windows are narrow and high to allow free circulation of air, Even in the corners of the living room, you find one or two small fountains..."⁶.

Damascene houses are filled with pottery, ceramics, intricately carved wooden boxes⁷, and most of the furniture is adorned with mother-of-pearl inlay⁸, Some houses are rich with rare marble⁹ and have diverse ceilings, Ornate vases filled with flowers are present everywhere. In addition, these houses are brimming with other precious furnishings, The reception rooms achieve comfort and pleasure for guests and are filled with luxurious carpets on beautiful tiles, Alongside, luxurious couches covered with the finest silk are placed¹⁰, often in red, these rooms are also furnished with exquisite items, and they are abundant in the reception rooms. They are full of luxurious, richly embroidered cushions, giving an opulent impression¹¹.

¹ La société des livres religieux de toulous ,op cit, p149.

² La société des livres religieux de toulous, ibid, p153.

³ Victor guerin, op cit,p414.

⁴ La société des livres religieux de toulous, op cit, p153.

⁵ Eugène melchior de vogue, op cit, p79.

⁶ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p427.

⁷ Eugène melchior de vogue, op cit, p78.

⁸ G téqui, caravane française de 1873 boneur et facilité du pelerinage de jerusalem et de bethléem, libraire éditeur de léoeuvre de saint michel, paris, France 1875, p261.

⁹ Victor guerin, op cit,p414.

¹⁰ Edouard blondel, op cit, p167.

¹¹ G téqui, op cit, p270.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

The degree of luxury in houses varies with the wealth of the owner. Many travelers spoke extensively about the Jewish houses in the city, and they were greatly impressed by their interior, which contained exquisite treasures and furnishings, this all suggests significant wealth among the Jewish residents of Damascus, We will attempt to gain an overview of the building style and design of these houses.

Some travelers pointed out that Jewish houses are the most beautiful and finest in the city¹, General house layouts are similar, while differences lie in the type of marble, furnishings, paint, and other aspects, The entrance involves passing through a short door and then a tunnel that leads to an interior courtyard with a fountain and various trees, Notably, the diversity of marble types and the elegance of their design², set them apart, Edmund de Pressensé shares his observations about the marble, saying: "...Jewish houses are paved with more luxurious marble compared to ordinary houses, particularly in the courtyard area, Jewish houses are filled with golden vessels..."³, This traveler provides more details about the Jewish house he visited in Damascus, stating: "...Jewish houses have small, poorly painted wooden doors with iron handles for knocking. They feature white and green marble panels, a reception hall with comfortable couches for guests, mosaic or marble floors, pearl-inlaid walls, ceramic vessels, vases, high and ornate ceilings painted or adorned with roses, A Jewish individual spent 200,000 francs to tile just one room..."⁴.

Others have described Jewish homes as palatial from the inside, being quite amazed by the treasures they found, which were not seen in any other homes in the city⁵, It's also noticeable that these houses incorporate imported styles from the West, especially in terms of the artistic murals on the walls, depicting breathtaking landscapes or other captivating scenes, The windows are distinctive and meticulously crafted, adorned with Arabesque motifs⁶, Savigny de Moncorps noted that the wall paintings are present on all sides of the house, and they are also abundant in the ceilings, representing a blend of various artistic influences, including Arab, Persian, and European styles⁷.

In addition to the aforementioned features, Jewish houses were distinguished by their inclusion of numerous engraved mirrors on marble surfaces, painted with enchanting colors, These houses also contain the most beautiful types of vases filled with bouquets of roses⁸, We conclude this section with the observations of Eugène Melchior de Vogue, who states:"...The Jews build luxurious houses with refined architecture due to their wealth, There are fountains made of

¹ Victor guerin, op cit,p414.

² M m p v, op cit, p70.

³ Edmond de pressensé, op cit, p237.

⁴ M m p v, ibid, p71.

⁵ Jean sigausc , voyage au pays du doute accompli par fortuné rampal, libraire de la société des gens de lettres, paris, France 1882, p115.

⁶ Jean sigausc , op cit, p116.

⁷ Savigny de moncorps, op cit, p164.

⁸ J t missionnaire, une escursion en orient, eugène ardant et cie éditeur , limoges, france1879, p469.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

sculpted gypsum, Italian paintings adorned with palm trees and marble, and other paintings brushed with a brush..."¹.

From what has been mentioned above, it can be said that most of the residences in the city of Damascus were well-built and suitable for comfortable living, Even the common people owned beautiful and comfortable houses, However, this does not negate the existence of an extremely poor class living in some remote areas of the city, Their dwellings consist of fragile structures resembling huts², Similar observations were also found in the book "Rihlat al-Bi'tha al-Diniyah li-Madinat Toulouse" (Religious Mission Journey to the City of Toulouse), confirming the presence of a considerable number of brick-built huts in the city³.

Mosque:

In the 19th century the city of Damascus contained numerous mosques which we have observed through the descriptions provided by French travelers, Most of their writings agreed on one opinion which was the Islamic character of the city, This Islamic aspect is highlighted before entering the city as the travelers noticed a large number of minarets and domes that adorned the city. The mission of the Religious Books Institution of Toulouse stated : "...the city of Damascus known as Sham is situated on a vast plain open to the south and east towards the desert and surrounded by mountains to the west and north, From afar you can see that it is filled with mosques whose minarets stand out..."⁴, Edward Blondel also described Damascus saying "...from a distance you can see its domes minarets and white houses..."⁵, The same sentiment was echoed by Abbé Jean Jacques Bourassé who affirmed that one of the most prominent features of the city before entering it was the presence of numerous shining minarets and domes thanks to the style of paint⁶.

The number of mosques in the city was very large. The traveler M.M.P.V who visited the city in the late 19th century provided statistics on the number of mosques estimating them to be 360 mosques, This is a significant number that reflects the local population's interest in constructing and maintaining mosques especially since the majority of its residents were Muslims⁷, Regarding the antiquity and modernity of mosque construction it is noteworthy that most of them date back to ancient periods as mentioned by the traveler Abbé Jean Jacques Bourassé who stated that most of the city's mosques are old and distinguished by their high domes⁸.

¹ Eugène melchior de vogue, op cit, p80.

² M m p v, op cit, p56.

³ La société des livres religieux de toulous, op cit, p152.

⁴ La société des livres religieux de toulous, ibid, p147.

⁵ Edouard blondel, op cit, p150.

⁶ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p420.

⁷ M m p v, op cit, p66.

⁸ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p438.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

Entrance to the mosques was forbidden for Europeans¹, Nevertheless they were able to access and infiltrate them through other means such as giving money also known as "baksheesh to the guards², This allowed them to provide detailed descriptions of the architectural style of these mosques, One of the most prominent and largest mosques in the city is the Great Mosque also known as the Umayyad Mosque, Abbé Jean Jacques Bourassé mentioned that it is one of the oldest mosques in the city dating back to ancient times especially the parts that were once a church³, The most beautiful description of this mosque was given by the French traveler Gustav le Bon in his book "The Civilization of the Arabs, " He said "...this magnificent mosque was built in the style of the early Islamic mosques, It has a large courtyard with arcades on its corners dedicated to prayers. Several minarets were erected on its corners, It is said that it was decorated with mosaics and wood covered in gold but only a few remnants of this ornamentation remain. Its walls display beautiful lines and the windows are adorned with colored glass some with traces of ancient mosaics. It has two square minarets and a third octagonal minaret, On top there is a dome and a crescent, The oldest of these three minarets is the Bride's Minaret..."⁴, From this we can say that this mosque is considered one of the greatest Islamic architectural landmarks that reflect the progress and development of Muslims in this field.

The Street:

The streets of Damascus are wide compared to other cities in the Levant and their sidewalks are well-maintained and elevated⁵, However most of the streets are irregular and winding as pointed out by Edouard Blondel who says "...Damascus is well-built and its streets are clean with sidewalks on both sides..."⁶, The construction of the streets gives them a sense of darkness blocking the sunlight, This creates a calm and peaceful atmosphere except in areas where bazaars and markets are located⁷, In these areas there is chaotic hustle and bustle with multiple sources of noise and shouting⁸.

The streets become narrower due to traders displaying their goods and sitting on mats which increases friction and makes it difficult to pass through⁹, As for cleanliness since Damascus is densely populated and primarily a commercial city most areas are known for the cleanliness of their streets, This is confirmed by some travelers such as Jean Jacques Bourassé and other

¹ Léon paul, journal de voyage Italie egypte judée samarie galilee syrie taurus citicien archipel grec, librairie francaice et etranger, paris, france1865, p144.

² Edouard blondel, op cit, p177.

³ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p432.

⁴ غوستاف لوبون ، حضارة العرب ، ترجمة: عادل زعير ، عصير الكتب للنشر والتوزيع ، مصر 2017م ، ص 161.

⁵ Edouard blondel, op cit, p161.

⁶ Edouard blondel, op cit, p143.

⁷ La société des livres religieux de toulouse, op cit, p154.

⁸ Léon paul, op cit, p139.

⁹ G téqui, op cit, p262.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

scholars¹, Naturally there are some areas in the city where you can find dirt accumulated filth and stray dogs².

Regarding the division of neighborhoods in Damascus it is evident from the writings of travelers that religious³ residential clusters were allocated⁴, These travelers mainly focused on detailing Christian and Jewish neighborhoods neglecting to mention the rest of the neighborhoods predominantly inhabited by Muslims, In general the Christian quarter also known as the Christian city follows the same architectural pattern that characterizes the rest of the city streets, Savigny De Moncorps mentioned that it includes a significant number of luxurious palaces⁵, The Christian quarter extends to the eastern side of Damascus and occupies a large area to the east of the city⁶.

The traveler Léon Paul who visited the city in 1865 noted that the construction of the neighborhood had suffered extensive damage during the massacres of 1860, However the residents managed to rebuild it in a very short period of time but it no longer retained its original shape⁷, Finally there is a Jewish quarter located in the southeast of the city which was densely populated⁸.

Conclusion

In conclusion we have reached a set of results in this study which are as follows:

- Urbanization has a direct relationship with the maturity of individuals and their activities representing the human activity in all material intellectual and cultural fields equally.
- Urbanization reflects the level of civilization economic and cultural society. Sometimes there may be a mismatch between the level of culture and urbanization because the reason for this may be that the inhabitants of this area have inherited urban patterns from their predecessors or acquired them through cultural interaction.
- Urbanization has a direct relationship with the natural environment and the geographic field according to Ibn Khaldun's theory, The climate characteristics of Damascus city influenced the construction of narrow alleys to protect residents from the scorching sun, Inside the houses are built in a suitable manner to provide a moderate and humid atmosphere due to the presence of fountains trees and diverse plants that soften the climate. Even the walls are built with stones that resist the heat of summer and the coldness of winter.

¹ L'abbé jean jacques bourassé, op cit, p426.

² Léon paul, op cit, p146.

³ Victor guerin, op cit,p402.

⁴ M m p v, op cit, p59.

⁵ Savigny de moncorps, journal d'un voyage en orient 1869-1870 egypte syrie constantinople, illustré par riou et alph de neuville, librairie hachette et cie, France 1873, p166.

⁶ Victor guerin, op cit,p420.

⁷ Léon paul, op cit, p141.

⁸ Victor guerin, op cit,p420.

Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

- The building style is related to the social aspect and the cities of Sham in general are built closely to an extent that one neighborhood resembles one large house reinforcing the bonds of love cooperation and mutual support, The neighborhood formed a cohesive unit, Moreover the building style preserves the secrets of the neighborhood which used to close its doors at night and even the houses preserve their secrets with their inner appearances that are not connected ¹to the outside except through small windows or doors made in a way that prevents seeing what is inside.
- The urban development the enthusiasm of the people of Damascus and their love for maximum luxury inside the houses can be traced back to previous eras, Some historians attribute it to the Umayyad era specifically the era of Walid who had a great desire for architecture and increasing construction, The people imitated him in that and the people of Damascus continued to follow in his foot steps and this passion has not been diminished, It was said about the people of Damascus: "The Damascus people through the appearance of their city and inside it with its beautiful palaces indicate their love for mastering their industries and their keenness on their heritage. This characteristic has remained in them continuously, They believe that an affluent person should possess a spacious house adorned with good furniture gathering the causes of comfort and bliss."

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Dr. HASSAD AbdSamed

The Architectural Characteristics of the City of Damascus in the 19th Century Through the Observations of French Travelers.

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