Ayyubid Aleppo
1178 – 1260
While legend accredits the ancient name _Halab_ (هلب) to the site where Prophet Abraham is said to have paused to milk his cow, historians define Aleppo (or _Halab_) as the region continuously inhabited by the great civilizations of the past and the present. Situated in the vast fertile plains of northern Syria, Aleppo is hemmed in by hills on the west and the north and the Syrian Desert to its east. The southern extension of Aleppo blends into the grain fields and olive and pistachio orchards that continue nearly to Hama, connecting Aleppo to the rest of Syria. Although the city is partly fed by the Quwayq River (which flows south from the Taurus Mountains to the west of the city) and unlike other river or oasis cities like Cairo or Damascus, Aleppo has been a multifaceted city from the beginning; its successes depending on a combination of topography, agriculture and industrious populations. From as early as the 2nd millennium B.C., civilizations left their mark on Aleppo; transforming it and reconstructing it to suit their regime. By the year 636 C.E., the Muslims had conquered the city under the command of Caliph Khalid bin al-Walid and thus began Aleppo’s complex agglomeration into an Islamic city.

Although Islamic cities can be studied through separate aspects, dealing with the internal arrangement, structural layout or legislative system, a comprehensive definition of an Islamic city would be inclusive of all aspects and as Janet Abu-Lughod asserts, it would closely examine the underlying causative forms that gave substance to the apparent forms. Through the development and restructuring of various institutions and neighborhoods, the expansion of a bustling economic life, and the formation of intricate social dynamics, Aleppo grew into a thriving Islamic city during the Ayyubid Era of Islamic history. Whereas early Islamic conquerors usually expressed their grandeur and imperial ambitions by founding new cities with central congregational mosques and large urban spaces, medieval dynasties such as the Ayyubids marked their power by refurbishing and modernizing existing towns while providing them with all the necessary institutions of urban life. In addition to being one of the largest and most important cities in the entire region of Syria, the Jazira and Anatolia throughout the medieval period, Aleppo has amply preserved the record of its past architectural achievements.

A Brief Note on Sources

Although the history of Aleppo is rich in secondary sources, including regional histories, dynastic chronicles, biographical histories, topographical literature, travel literature and poetry, few primary sources illuminate the rich cultural and urban history of Aleppo. Secondary sources include the Chronicles of Ibn Wasil (d.1298), written under the patronage of the late Ayyubids, Ibn al-Adim (an
Ayyubid notable in Aleppo), Ibn Shaddad, 13th century historian of Aleppo and the travel literatures of Ibn Jubayr (1180) and Ibn Battuta (1330). In more recent studies, biographical works of Saladin (Salah-al-Din Ayyubi) and geographical works such as Jean Sauvaget’s masterly study of Aleppo (drawing on architectural, archeological, epigraphic and literary sources) and Heinz Gaube and Eguen Wirth’s study of the demographics and economics of Aleppo have richly enlightened the urban context of Aleppo’s medieval monuments.

**Administrative History of Aleppo**

The city is said to have been incepted early in the 2nd millennium B.C. although no substantial monuments exist from that time. In the aftermath of Alexander the Great’s conquests, Aleppo was allotted to Seleucus Nicator (in the 3rd century B.C.) who named it Beoria and built the city according to a regular Hippodamean plan surrounded by a squarish wall whose eastern side was intercepted by the citadel mound. With the characteristic urban foundations laid down, Aleppo would take on a growing urban life for many centuries to come. In addition to its regular underlying grid, the Roman-Byzantine period added colonnaded avenues and an agora (a public square) to the city as it prospered as a stable Christian community with a small minority of Jews and Arabs. Eventually, with the fragmentation of religious allegiances that arose due to various Christian sects, Jews and the pagan Arabs, Aleppo surrendered peacefully to the Muslim conquest in 636 C.E. The first mosque was built just inside the Antioch Gate (the western gate from where the Muslim army first entered) and the Muslim governor signed a pact guaranteeing the inhabitants of Aleppo their lives, possessions and places of worship.

The Umayyad period saw further architectural developments and certain centralization in authority. The Abbasid period marked a definite decline in the prosperity of Aleppo; perhaps due to deliberate neglect by the succeeding Abbasid Caliphate. By the 10th century, a Seljuk invasion brought about a short period of rule by the Hamdanids. The infamous Hamdanid prince, Sayf-al-Dawla is said to have built a large palace west of city with a Shiite shrine (Mashhad al-Dikka) close to it lending a distinctive Shiite character to the western part of the city.

The Byzantine invasion of 962 followed by other incursions and Bedouin raids nearly destroyed Aleppo and led to an unstable succession of control by an Arab tribe, the Midrasids (1023-1079). This period was marked by an erosion of the city’s infrastructure, unstable political forces and repeated onslaughts by the Fatimids, Seljuks and even the Crusaders. By 1123, a Seljuk Shii qadi (judge), Ibn-al-Khashshab, had ordered the conversion of the Byzantine cathedral of St. Helena into a mosque.
weakening and eventually banishing the Christian community from the center of the city to the periphery; thus paving the way for installing a purely Islamic heritage in the city’s center. In 1128, Aleppo was officially given to Imad al-Din Zangi as a fiefdom. With his son Nur al-Din Mahmud’s vision, the city’s walls were rebuilt, the citadel was refortified, the Great Mosque was expanded and various Sunni institutions were founded, allowing Aleppo to regain some of its former glory. In the wake of two large earthquakes (in 1157 and 1170), Nur al-Din Mahmud rebuilt the shrine of Abraham (Maqam Ibrahim) within the citadel, added a minaret to the Great Mosque and restored some of the towers of the city. By 1178, the Kurdish Ayyubids inherited a city and citadel rich in accumulated history and cultural remains, all within the confines of a wall just over one kilometer on each side. By 1260, the Ayyubid dynasty in Aleppo collapsed at the hands of the Mongols who ravaged the city and left in their wake, mass destruction and devastation followed by the succession of Mamluk and Ottoman empires.

The Ayyubids of Aleppo

The Ayyubid state itself was a loose confederation consisting of almost independent city-states governed by prominent Ayyubid princes who eventually formed their own hereditary dynasties, such as those in Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo. Politically, the Ayyubid dynasty of Aleppo concerned itself with establishing a legitimate, stable and powerful government within the larger state of the Ayyubids. In religious aspects, they sought to revive Sunni Islam, the foundations of which had been laid down during the reign of Nur al-Din Zangi. In a social respect, the Ayyubids seemed to have been keenly aware of the ethnic and sectarian divisions within Aleppo and sought to minimize said divisions. Physically, the important features of the city, predating the Ayyubids, served as a matrix within which the Ayyubids built their own structures and added their own layer of cultural heritage. In Aleppo, the Ayyubid reign lasted from 1178 to 1260, beginning with Salah al-Din (1178-1193) and continuing through his successors: his son al-Zahir Ghazi (1193-1216), his son after him, al-Aziz Muhammad (1216-1236), and ending with Salah al-Din’s great grandson, al-Nasir Salah al-Din Yusuf II (1236-1260).

When Salah al-Din captured Aleppo in 1178, he initially administered the province in the name of his son al-Zahir, who was just a child at the time. Before he left Aleppo in his conquest to expand his empire, he made some definitive administrative decisions, changing the political and social fabric of Aleppo. One of his decrees forced non-Muslims in Aleppo to wear distinctive clothes, perhaps as an attempt to reconcile Shiites and Sunnis to Ayyubid rule while differentiating them from the non-Muslim communities of the city. Furthermore, he put his own officials in charge of the Hanafite colleges of
Aleppo, giving them full responsibility to appoint or dismiss teachers and control endowments of the college. A special decree for the muhtasib of Aleppo instructed him to ensure that the Shiites did not slander the Companions of the Prophet and to prevent the use of mosques and places of worship as shops or stores\textsuperscript{26}. While allowing knowledgeable men to continue their crafts, jugglers and soothsayers were to be banned and doctors were given a fixed salary to continue their services in the citadel\textsuperscript{27}. In exerting his rule, Salah al-Din demonstrated his influence on the society by controlling crafts and professions directly and indirectly through his own nominated officials. While he faced an initial struggle with some residents of Aleppo, his dynasty strengthened with the stratification of society such that a professional class was allowed to develop with direct dependence on the ruling class.

Al-Zahir Ghazi marked his reign with some of the greatest architectural achievements seen in Aleppo. In order to establish firmer security, he rebuilt the northern and northwestern parts of the city wall as these were most susceptible to foreign attack (from Bab-al-Nasr to Bab-al-Jinan, see Appendix A, Figure 1)\textsuperscript{28}. With a number of his military officers building towers on this stretch of the wall, he allowed them to inscribe their names on their respective towers and thus each tower was identified with a specific military official\textsuperscript{29}. As most of the Jewish population of the city resided near Bab-al-Nasr, he renamed the gate to ‘Bab-al-Yahud’\textsuperscript{30}. Al-Zahir rebuilt the entire eastern wall; extending the southern part of it to incorporate the ‘dar-al-adl’ (court of grievances) between the older and newer walls as an added measure of security. In addition to installing three new gates in the walls (Bab-al-Nairab, Bab-al-Maqm, Bab-al-Qanat), he extended the city walls substantially to the south and the east, incorporating the ‘Qalat-al-Sharif’ within the new enclosure of the city\textsuperscript{31}. Al Zahir’s expansion of the city increased the enclosed area by fifty percent, creating a new and unique overall shape such that the citadel was now surrounded by a wall on all sides thus making it doubly fortified and increasing its defensibility\textsuperscript{32}. These refortifications and renovations demonstrated the increasing prosperity and stability of the Ayyubid rule in Aleppo.

With the death of al-Zahir, Aleppo passed on to his 3-year old son Al-Aziz Muhammad, and his atabek, Shihab al-Din Toghril (a freed slave of al-Zahir). While al-Aziz was growing up, Toghril effectively ruled Aleppo from 1216 to 1231\textsuperscript{33}. Eventually, after the short rule and death of al-Aziz in 1235, his mother, Dayfa Khatun (wife of al-Ghazi) became the first woman to govern an Islamic dynasty\textsuperscript{34}. Although she did not have coins struck in her name nor did she have her name pronounced in the Friday sermon (these were the two main emblems of a Muslim dynasty)\textsuperscript{35}, she effectively ruled Aleppo through her state officials and secretaries. As the symbolic male succession continued despite her regency, al-
Nasir Salah al-Din Yusuf II succeeded to the throne in 1243 after the death of Dayfa Khatun. As the last Ayyubid prince of Aleppo, he became a major player in Ayyubid politics and employed an expansionist policy, taking over the Jazira, Homs, and eventually Damascus successfully restoring the glory of the house of Salah al-Din. While his father and grandfather devoted their energies to developing Aleppo’s urban and social structures, al-Nasir sought to expand his empire and devoted very little of his energies to the growth of Aleppo itself. By the later part of the Ayyubid period, Aleppo had become a beautifully complex city, defended by its great citadel and an astounding array of renovated gates and towers. The Great Mosque still stood at the heart of the city and the vast markets surrounding it added to its bustling economic fabric while the citadel and surrounding quarters formed a secondary focus, official and aristocratic in nature.

*Regional Developments during the Ayyubid Era*

The expansion of the city on all sides, but to a greater extent on the southern and western sides resulted in an overall expansion such that previously extramural parts of the city were now incorporated within. By the mid-12th century, al-Hadir, a region southwest of Aleppo, which was previously settled by Turkoman armies brought to Aleppo by the Zangids had transformed from an encampment like the early Islamic *amsaars* into a more or less permanent settlement (see Appendix A, Figure 1). Approximately one kilometer south of the city wall, the pre-Islamic shrine of Abraham (*Maqam Ibrahim*) attracted pilgrims and eventually became a burial site for Muslims who wished to be buried close to an ancient prophet (*Maqrabath al-Salihin; Cemetery of the Meritorious*) during the Ayyubid era, this became a sanctified region, known as The Shrines (*al-Maqamat*), and continued to grow and attract pilgrims. In addition, the quarter beneath the citadel (*Taht-al-Qalah*) gained increasing importance and as the citadel was transformed from a military garrison to a fortified palatial city. The proximity of these quarters to the center of power entailed a disproportionately large number of aristocratic residence and pious institutions.

*Demographic Makeup of the City*

At a population of approximately 100,000 in the 13th century, Aleppo was a diverse and prosperous city divided in regions such that each quarter had a definitive role prescribed from its spatial location within the city. The sector just north of the citadel was chiefly populated by the upper classes.
The famous Farafra quarter was inhabited by the most aristocratic of the Muslim families. Their proximity to the citadel and the abundance of water in the channels and fountains of this area defined their raised status in society. This area was also marked by a large number of pious institutions; some were endowed by the patrician families while others were established by the Ayyubid sultans. The region to the south of the citadel had a more official character, perhaps because it also faced the entrance block of the citadel. This area (surrounding the ‘taht-al-qalah’) housed many official institutions such as the dar-al-adl and the madrassa al-Sultaniyya. The northeastern quarters of the walled city were inhabited by Turkish and Kurdish official classes while the quarters east of the citadel were inhabited by newly arrived Bedouins and farmers from surrounding regions. The central area of Great Mosque and its surrounding markets made for a prime residential location. This area also became noted for its increasing Sufi character with the establishment of various khanqahs (official institutions of Sufi brotherhoods) in the vicinity of the citadel. Further emphasizing the importance of the oldest quarters, south and southwest of the Great Mosque, an increasing number of madrassas began to cluster in this area. Closer to the location of some Shiite shrines, the Shiite quarters tended to cluster in the western part of the city whereas an almost exclusive Sunni population dominated the eastern half of the city. The northwestern quadrant of the city housed the majority of Christians and Jews while the southwestern and eastern parts of the city were inhabited by exclusively Muslims communities. The city was now taking on a distinct character, one that included minorities such as the Christians, Jews and Shiites but sought to distinguish them from the majority Sunni population.

For the purpose of military exercises, parades and gaming, several maydans developed close to the citadel and just outside some of the city’s gates. While the military had taken up a somewhat permanent residence within the city, it was necessary for the soldiers to make use of these maydans in order to keep their military training in effect and participate in lighter social interplay. On some days of the week, these maydans functioned as open-air markets (i.e. suq-al-khayl) allowing for the city’s mercantile population to have their space as well. Although the city expanded by the incorporation and creation of extramural quarters, this was not due to a lack of space within the walled city. It was more so because of the need to separate the Turkish, Turkoman, and Kurdish soldiers from the Arab population within city as well as to inhabit the sanctified region close the Maqam Ibrahim (south of the city). Eventually, the southern quarters of al-Hadir, al-Maqamat, and al-Zahiriyya (see Appendix A, Figure 1) became somewhat independent urban agglomerates with a more pastoral character. Although these areas were urbanized with the creation of madrassas and other pious institutions within it, these newer regions remained sparsely populated during the Ayyubid reign.
The Social Structure of Ayyubid Aleppo

The city and province of Aleppo during the 12th and 13th centuries, was largely governed by a Kurdish dynasty while the native population of the city was of Arab descent. Large foreign armies lacking any cultural cohesion consisted of various ethnic components and remained segregated from the native urban population of Aleppo. With Kurdish and Turkish horsemen, Turkoman and Arab infantry and elite corps of slave soldiers (mamalik), the Ayyubid army settled in the outskirts of the city in regions of ample pasture and training ground51. While none of these army men took part in any cultural or architectural patronage, they were employed as viziers, governors, regents, supervisors and scribes who owed their position to the sovereigns and were seen as their closest allies. The Ayyubids also employed a special class of officials (al-khassa) consisting of eunuchs, slaves, freed slaves, and a small number of nativized foreigners from various Islamic lands.

The eunuchs in particular, played a special role within the Ayyubid kingdom. Although Islam prohibits castration of men, owning a eunuch was not prohibited. The Ayyubid kings employed eunuchs belonging to the mamluk institution (slaves who were forced to convert to Islam) while other civilizations employed free or native eunuchs who did not need to change their religion52. With increasing polygamy and the concubine culture, eunuchs served their sultans by protecting harems and guarding holy places and the sultan himself. Unlike the sons of the amir or ruler, the eunuchs were allowed to wander the palaces and residences, including the female quarters53. As Nur al-Din Zangi employed a eunuch in highly official posts in Aleppo, so did al-Zahir Ghazi. In 1216, al-Zahir appointed a Rumi eunuch, Shihab-al-Din Toghril as governor of Aleppo’s citadel, head of the treasury, atabek of his two sons and as ustad-dar’ in the palace and the harem54. As a highly respected deputy of al-Zahir, Toghril managed to keep Aleppo under firm control while al-Zahir’s son, al-Aziz Muhammad was growing up.

The native population of the city was led by a relatively small number of longstanding patrician families, also known as the ‘a’yan’, most of which derived their wealth from agriculture and trade within the city and in the neighboring regions55. Most men of word, or ulama, belonged to these patrician families and gained considerable power as well as a certain degree of independence within the Ayyubid rule. These ulama were also employed by the state as judges, professors, administrators of waqfs and supervisors of the markets56. As this class spanned several centuries, which was a unique characteristic of Aleppo as compared to patrician families in other Islamic cities, they achieved a high degree of wealth and eminence57. These families were involved in the recently revived trade with Byzantium and the Latin
west in addition to holding lands within Aleppo. Their prestige and wealth grew continuously as the economic sector of Aleppo had not yet been monopolized by the state and remained primarily in the hands of these patrician families. As we will see later, these Aleppine notables made their mark in various forms of architectural patronage within the city. The ‘amma’ was a less differentiated social grouping beneath the patrician families. This class consisted of shopkeepers, artisans, peddlers and the common workers. While the Sufi mystics had the greatest influence over this class, the class beneath became the despised underworld consisting of street entertainers, funeral workers, scavengers and beggars.

This social structure came to be and remained unified largely because of the ‘iqta’ system, also known as Islamic feudalism which was first conceived as a mechanism of tax farming intended to support the army. Under the Ayyubids, this system underwent some basic transformations whereby it became a hereditary property and the protection of its legal succession from father to heirs became the duty of the sovereign. In essence, it became a long-term lease on a revenue-producing property, the main purpose of which was to provide military commanders with a steady income in return for their services. The muqta, provincial governor with an iqta, was still a military official without any legal status of his own and acted simply as a delegate of the ruler. This system initially produced substantial profits for the ruling class, the military and the city’s patricians. Furthermore, expendable wealth and possessions were often converted into social status through the waqf, or charitable endowment as it was seen as the only secure way for the upper classes to protect their own wealth and perpetuate the status of their families. These charitable endowments could be used towards the foundation and maintenance of pious institutions (i.e. madrassas and khanqahs) according to the patrons’ specific requirements as long as these didn’t interfere with the Shariah or the public function of the institution.

The state waqf, introduced by Nur al-Din Zangi in the 12th century in an attempt to establish Sunni orthodoxy used the state treasury to create new Sunni institutions and augment the preexisting ones. This system continued in the Ayyubid era, eventually employing the state waqf system as a means to revive Sunni conventions and establish Sunni Islam within political sovereignty.

Urban Life and Economics of Ayyubid Aleppo

With its unique location, Aleppo was a key town on trade routes from centuries ago. Situated on a high plateau halfway between the Mediterranean coast and the Euphrates River, Aleppo was marked as the pivotal summit of several important trading routes as well as pilgrimage routes. Interestingly
enough, Persian pilgrims brought their carpets along, trading them in the city’s markets as a practical means of financing their pilgrimage. The city’s significance and prosperity can be attributed to its location at the end of the Asian Silk Road that passed through central Asia and Mesopotamia. The commercial life of Aleppo itself thrived during 13th century especially after four commercial treaties (in 1202, 1224, 1229, and 1254) had authorized the Venetians to set up a permanent factory in Aleppo. Serving as entrepot in Venetian trade with China, Ayyubid Aleppo reached its peak in the trade circles. With the bustling economic trade surrounding the city, the core of the city developed extensively to include a considerable proportion of facilities including the caravanserais, khans, and courtyards as warehouses with surrounding workshops as well as a rich façade of the central souqs. Travelling in the 12th century, Ibn Jubayr praised the wide markets of Aleppo which contained all kinds of trades and qaisariyyas making Aleppo a rich city.

In the 13th century, Yaqut al-Hamawi, a Syrian geographer says: “Verily, I, Yaqut have visited Halab and it was the best of all lands for agriculture. They cultivated here cotton, sesame, watermelons, cucumbers, millet, maize, apricots, figs and apples. They only have the rains to water their lands, and yet they raise abundant crops, and of such richness as I have not seen in other lands.” Connected to a rich and fairly populous agricultural hinterland, Aleppo benefited in substantial revenues (of around 3,000,000 dirhams in the 13th century). During the stable political conditions of the Ayyubid era and with fertile lands and occasional rain, a substantial amount of agriculture was produced. Among natural products such as cereals, fruits and vegetables, sugarcane, cottons, silks and rice were also cultivated and became the most important source of revenue. In addition to trading and effectively using minerals such as iron-ore, salt, sulfur, and asphalt, Aleppans were active in the production of manufactured goods during the 12th and 13th centuries. While glassware, textiles, perfumes and soap were among many of Aleppo’s productions, the city also maintained an extremely important paper-making industry. Supporting a variety of occupations such as arrow-makers, book-binders, carpenters, cloth-merchants, copyists, felt-makers, laborers, hakims, oculists, perfumers, procurers, property-agents, second-hand clothes dealers, and tailors, Aleppo continued to grow in the complexity of its commercial activities during the 12th and 13th centuries.

While it is obvious that commercial and mercantile activities may have been a source of wealth for the indigenous religious families for Aleppo, most of the families owned (either partly or wholly) villages around the city which they would presumably rent out to the inhabitants to farm. Unlike the iqta, which was like a lease, the villages of the leading Aleppan families were regarded as personal
property or milk. As such, these properties passed down from generation to generation and were more secure against revocation. However, the ruler could still intervene in the ownership of hereditary property\textsuperscript{76}. Profits from these properties would be sent back to Aleppo and used to support the families as well as patronize the building of important institutions\textsuperscript{77}. The religious aristocracy came to exercise their influence in madrassas (or other institutions built by them) and by teaching Islamic jurisprudence, merging their interest with that of the ruler.

With the heart of the old city occupied by the Great Mosque at the site of a former Roman agora and large commercial centers established along the traditional east-west axis of the ancient Hellenistic town, the city of Aleppo preserves much of its past. While the Great Mosque occupies the focal point of the city’s public activities, private dwellings are confined to separate residential areas\textsuperscript{78}. The core of the city, containing covered market alleys (souqs) specializing in various branches of commerce, was bordered by storehouses (khans) and manufacturing units (qayserais), reflecting the city’s vested interest in commerce\textsuperscript{79}. While the main alleys connected the central area of the city to the major gates, narrow alleys within the residential areas bordered closed walls, holding within the private lives of the Aleppan houses (see Appendix A, Figure 4). Although houses in Aleppo have been built and rebuilt throughout its extensive history, key descriptions of the Aleppan houses from 12\textsuperscript{th} century denote that they were always flat-roofed and made of stone with large rooms arranged around an inner courtyard\textsuperscript{80}. With only a few openings towards the main streets and the rooms facing inwards, the houses maintained definite privacy while the inner courtyard allowed for a semblance of outdoor living\textsuperscript{81}. These characteristics were not unique to Aleppo or to the Ayyubid era but reflected aspects of Islamic culture pertaining to the segregation of men and women and the privatization of family life away from the public sector.

\textit{Patronage in Ayyubid Aleppo}

The Ayyubid period is especially characterized by a widening of the basis of architectural patronage to include Ayyubid sultans, foreign court officials, native patrician families, and uniquely, the women of the Ayyubid court. The sultan, al-Zahir Ghazi was known as the greatest architectural patron in the history of Aleppo as his name appears on 24 inscriptions, reflecting his policy of consolidation and defense (See Appendix B, Figure 5)\textsuperscript{82}. His work focused primarily on fortifications and secondarily on the establishment of pious institutions. One of the most important developments made under his reign was the canalization and distribution of waterworks in Aleppo\textsuperscript{83}. He extended and repaired the water system
within the walled city and even in its extramural suburbs south and southwest of the city. His enormous project which entailed the laying out of a vast network of underground ducts bringing water to all major pious institutions and private residences in the city reflected his focus and development of the infrastructure of Aleppo. By the creation of various cisterns and fountains to supply water to markets and residential neighborhoods, he added to the city’s beauty with the aesthetic qualities of these features. Because al-Zahir Ghazi was not too politically involved in the Ayyubid confederacy, he devoted extensive energies to refurbishing the city of Aleppo. Along with building his palace and a congregational mosque with a step well within the citadel, al-Zahir paid considerable attention to religious monuments within the city. Even though his two major madrassas (al-Sultaniyya and al-Zahiriyya) were Sunni institutions, he was a great patron of both Sunni and Shiite shrines. From this and other studies, it is possible to suggest that al-Zahir and his successors sought to unify the Islamic sects, treating them more or less evenhandedly. Within the madrassa al-Sultaniyya, al-Zahir’s mausoleum is found and it remains a site revered by pilgrims and tourists.

Al-Zahir’s son, al-Aziz Muhammad continued most of his father’s projects during his short reign while his grandson, al-Nasir Yusuf II restricted his patronage to fortifications. Al-Nasir Yusuf II also took a special interest in the city’s commercial wellbeing, building two markets east of the mosque and restoring the bimaristan of Nur al-Din Zangi. State officials such as Shadbakht (a freed slave of Nur al-Din Zangi), Atabek Shihab al-Din Toghril, and Jamal al-Dawla Iqbal al-Zahiri al-Khatuni played important roles in much of the city’s patronage. Taking special interest to build or restore shrines and madrassas throughout the city as well continuing the projects of their sovereigns, these officials left their mark on the city of Aleppo through a variety of small monuments.

Furthermore, Aleppo was known for its patrician families, several old households known for their hereditary wealth. These families displayed their status by building impressive madrassas and numerous other monuments to attest to their prosperity and relative stability. Patrician families of Aleppo were a class consisting of extended families variously involved in agriculture, trade, scholarship as well as occupying influential official positions within the state. Some of the most famous influential patrician families in Aleppo during the Ayyubid era were the Banu al-Adim and Banu al-Ajami. Known as the leaders of the Sunni community, these families exerted their control and power within the city by founding various madrassas, mosques, and khanqahs, further adding to the city’s distinctly dominant Sunni character. The considerable variance seen in the patronage of this class is reflective of the wealth of the various families within this class as well as their commitment to building pious institutions. While
some may argue that these were built only as an expression of the family’s wealth, they were still valid pious institutions whose function was to provide religious knowledge.

An interesting aspect of patronage in Aleppo was dominated by the women of the court. Medieval Islamic court women were independent, wealthy and were inclined towards charitable acts and although their person was hidden behind veils, cloaks and curtains, their actions were highly demonstrative of their capabilities. These important patronesses were princesses, free women of noble origin who had possibly married Ayyubid princes to enhance their prestige. As with the marriage of al-Zahir Ghazi to Dayfa Khatun (his paternal cousin), marriages within the family were often arranged to initiate and develop alliances and foster a sense of unity among different members of the royal household. The Ayyubid woman’s status was ultimately established when she gave birth to a male child who would be a future prince or ruler. In Ayyubid Aleppo, the patronage of court women was reflected in the building of khanqahs, perhaps emphasizing the centrality of Sufism in female piety. Of great importance in architectural patronage, Dayfa Khatun (wife of al-Ghazi and mother of al-Aziz Muhammad) was the effective regent queen between 1236 and 1243. Still standing, two important buildings are directly attributed to her patronage, the khanqah al-Farafra near the citadel and madrassa al-Firdaws in the Maqamat which served as a mausoleum and a khanqah (see Appendix). Historians suggest that because Muslim women were not allowed to pass their estates on to siblings (by Shariah law), they used their wealth to establish pious institutions which served funerary and commemorative functions and further enhanced the patroness’s natal family’s prestige.

As evident, officials, patrons, court women and even the Ayyubid sultans traded in their wealth for status; hoping to gain perpetuity and in the process, they laid down the foundations for some of the most beautiful monuments in Islamic architecture. The patrons exercised their role in society through their wealth, promoting institutions which stood for their beliefs, eventually developing an increasingly Sunni Islamic atmosphere in Aleppo.

The Scholars of Ayyubid Aleppo

As a whole functional city is made up of various pieces and parts, so was Ayyubid Aleppo. With its upper classes acting and officials building madrassas and other exquisite institutions, it would be natural enough for the city to attract, foster and yield scholars of a remarkable caliber. Before the Ayyubid reign, famous poets and philosophers such as al-Mutanabbi and al-Farabi walked the streets of Aleppo and left a lasting impression on the world. The Ayyubids encouraged poetry and scholars of the
religion, ulama, as well as scholars of the sciences to make a place within their courts, in the process, adding to Aleppo’s fame as a thriving center. In the 12th century, Kamal al-Din Ibn al-Adim, an Ayyubid notable of Aleppo wrote about the history of his native city in his Zubadat al-Halab fi Ta’rikh Halab (The Cream of the history of Aleppo) in addition to compiling a massive biographical work of the famous men of Aleppo, the Bughyat al-Talab (The Student’s Desire)96. Impressed by his efforts, the last Ayyubid prince, al-Nasir Yusuf II appointed him as a qadi and vizier in the Ayyubid court97. In addition to a famed astronomer, al-Urdi (d. 1266), Aleppo was also home to an eminent writer in the field of eye surgery, Khalifa bin abi al-Muhassin98. While Ibn al-Lubadi (d.1267)99, a physician and authority on various practical sciences philosophized on matters of astronomy and mathematics, the famous Jalal al-Din Rumi came to Aleppo for advancement in his education100. Aleppo’s connection to various other scholars and famous individuals reflect its status as a thriving city entertaining various levels of society and culture.

The Citadel of Aleppo: A Magnificent Ayyubid Landmark

As Salah al-Din, the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty of Aleppo once said, “This city is the eye of Syria and the citadel is its pupil,”101 the location of Aleppo and its citadel were considered as the most remarkable of its features without precedent in any other region of the Islamic domain. In an Ayyubid panegyric for al-Zahir Ghazi, the poet Ibn Abu-’l Mansur says (about the citadel)102:

With spacious expanses and lofty peaks
it has fatigued the viewer from seeing its summit
Its extreme height and loftiness would almost
stop the orbiting and encircling stars
Arrogant, it laughs in the face of Time,
who has long ridiculed such lofty buildings

The citadel of Aleppo is judged to be the single most important monument in the history of Aleppo. Like the Zangids before them, the Ayyubids used the citadel as a palatial complex, instilling is decisive role in transforming the power relations within Aleppo103. As evident from the striking quantity and high quality of a number of passages of poetry and prose praising the citadel, the citadel was thought of as an inspiring subject and the Ayyubid court actively encouraged these appraisals. Although the citadel was marred by many building phases—the pre-Islamic, Seljuk, Zangid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk phases—it was the Ayyubid phase that left a lasting mark, incorporating previous efforts into its framework and presenting a distinctly Ayyubid form in appearance (See Appendix B, Figures 1 and 2)104.
Within the citadel, the Abrahamic shrine (*Maqam Ibrahim*; see Appendix A, Figure 2) imbues a sense of sanctity while linking it with another Abrahamic shrine to the south of the city\(^{105}\). Abraham, considered as the patron saint of Aleppo, was venerated by the Ayyubids in an attempt to enhance their authority and legitimacy by deepening their roots in Aleppo and reinforcing Sunni Islam\(^{106}\). The citadel had been transformed from a military outpost into the center of the court and administration. After the Great Mosque at the center of the city, the citadel was considered the most important institution and pole of attraction. The progressive withdrawal of the sultan behind the gates and gardens of his citadel had major implications for the Great Mosque as well as the city, eventually lessening the status of the Great Mosque as the hub of the Muslim community\(^{107}\).

During al-Zahir’s reign, the citadel became a fortified and largely self-sufficient palatial city with a series of baths, a palace, vast water cisterns, granaries, a variety of military installations, a substantial mosque and the Abrahamic shrine\(^{108}\). At the highest point of the citadel, approximately 50 meters above the city, al-Zahir built a traditional Friday mosque with an open courtyard, a prayer hall with a central dome, and a minaret (some 21 meters above the mosque)\(^{109}\). The soaring minaret and exceptional location of this mosque provides it with characteristic functions (see Appendix B, Figure 3). Perhaps it served as a beacon for sending light signals or perhaps as an observation tower for surveillance purposes. Historians like Gertrude Bell have remarked on the minaret’s appeal, as it was “visible several hours away while no vestige of the city appears until the last mile of the road”\(^{110}\).

Despite the relative reclusiveness of these dynasties, the Ayyubids were actively involved in the welfare and control of their subjects. As the Ayyubid palace was situated inside the citadel where only important foreign visitors and dignitaries were received and the general population was not allowed to enter, a necessary link between the palace and city was needed. The citadel’s direct link with the ‘*dar-al-adl*’ (court of grievances) just outside its perimeter enabled the Ayyubids to exert control over administrative and legal matters as well as present their message of piety and protection to the surrounding city\(^{111}\). The ‘*dar-al-adl*’, most intimately connected with the Ayyubid Palace through a secret gate, contained at least one *iwan* for public audiences of the judges and the sultan. As an institution, it connected the public’s concerns in economic matters (charity, taxation, price control and inheritance) with the stately power and authority attributed to the government\(^{112}\). It is important to note that the ‘*dar-al-adl*’ was not an autonomous institution as it received its ultimate authority from the sultan and not the city’s elders or nobles or a chief justice. In addition to the ‘*dar-al-adl*’, there was a region outside
the citadel, close the Great Mosque which served as a majlis-‘aam, an institution for public audience, functioning as a zone of official exchange between the Ayyubids and the city.

For the palace itself, al-Zahir Ghazi built several apartments and rooms, guardrooms, arsenals, baths, a palace garden with trees and flowers, covered porticos and a courtyard, complete with fountains, and cisterns. This palace and other medieval palaces were not of classical Islamic prototypes; rather, they entailed a new palace type with important forms and images derived from the past. The palace was smaller with greater precision in plan and complexity of portals and other architectural devices (see Appendix B, Figures 6 & 7). Although there is a lack of literary evidence for any ceremonies in Ayyubid Aleppo, it is possible that the sultan led the Friday prayer and other feast prayers. As well, a possible path from the citadel to the Maqam Ibrahim is hypothesized as the so-called processional way; lined with other monuments, this may have had a ceremonial function (see Appendix A, Figure 2). The Ayyubids presented an image of austere authority from within the walls of the citadel even though they were a somewhat alien dynasty reigning over Aleppo. By asserting their control and authority through various institutions and preserving the sanctity of the city with its connection to Abraham, the Ayyubids of Aleppo effectively established their rule and dealt justly with a growing urban population.

*Institutions and their Functional Implications*

Although only a few congregational mosques were built by the Ayyubids in Aleppo, a great many madrassas and khanqahs were constructed. The relative inattention to mosques demonstrates a possible shifting expression of official popular piety toward the smaller and more specialized institutions that were central to the Sunni Islamic policies of the Ayyubids. Wherever mosques were built during this era, they were done so pure due to a lack of a mosque in that area and thus served only necessary purposes. The Great Mosque, however, was extended to a great extent and the Ayyubid ruler, al-Zahir commissioned the building of the citadel mosque (See Appendix C, Figures 1, 2, and 3). Again, these projects can only be seen as serving functional purposes; a growing population required extensions in the Great Mosque and the relative isolation of the citadel required a central mosque to be built, supporting a somewhat self-sufficient palatial city within the citadel.

The landscape of Aleppo is littered with enthusiastic patronage taking on the form of madrassas, khanqahs and various shrines. It is important to note that the Ayyubid period specifically saw a greater endorsement of exclusively Sunni institutions and such a pattern can be ascribed the transformation of
formerly independent institutions into instruments of the state. While ancient Aleppo held a variety of shrines—pre-Islamic, Christian, Sunni and Shiite—the desire to minimize sectarian rivalry led the Sunni Ayyubid rulers to aid to patronize Shiite shrines as well. This can be understood as a conciliatory gesture on their part; significant in instilling an authoritative stamp on the popular Shiite shrines. Architectural studies indicate that the two sects (Sunni & Shiite) competed for the creation of elaborate monuments as well as the staging of intricate religious ceremonies.

At the time of Nur al-Din Zangi, the madrassa was used as the chief institution of Sunni revival. As it was also used for official receptions and banquets, its role became increasingly encroached in the fabric of official institutions with more definitive links with the state authority. The madrassa al-Shadbakhtiyiya, the earliest preserved Ayyubid madrassa is located 200 meters west of the citadel. As its patron was a state official, Shadbakht, a freed slave of Nur al-Din Zangi, this madrassa, like many others in Ayyubid Aleppo took on more state-like functions and the activities within the madrassa took on the preferences of their patrons. Other important madrassas from the Ayyubid era include the madrassa al-Kamiliyya, madrassa al-Sharafiyya, and madrassa al-Zahiriyya (located in al-Maqamat) (see Appendix A, Figure 1 for locations and Appendix C for images). Among the most prominent and elaborate madrassas in Aleppo is the madrassa al-Sultaniyya, the madrassa of al-Zahir Ghazi, ruler and most esteemed patron of Aleppo. This madrassa, completed in 1223, also houses the mausoleum of the Ayyubid prince in its southeast corner. The mausoleum has windows on three sides, perhaps to encourage various acts of piety by the passing population. Facing the entrance block of the citadel, this madrassa was created for both Hanafis and Shafis (two sects within Sunni Islam) intending to affirm the traditionalist orientation of the Ayyubids while reinforcing their preference of Sunni Islam.

Another famous madrassa, also known for its austere patroness, Dayfa Khatun, the madrassa al-Firdaws is located in the Maqamat, south of the original walled city. This madrassa also functioned as a khanqah and is the embodiment of the superb Ayyubid architecture, complete with courtyards, iwans and residential quarters. Although the city is generally not associated with Islamic mysticism (or Sufism), some of the longest and most elaborate mystical inscriptions in all Islamic architecture are found within this Aleppan madrassa. Perhaps this indicates a renewed interest in Sufism now harnessed within the context of Sunni Islam as well as being a reflection of Dayfa Khatun’s interest in Sufism. By the 12th century, Sufis themselves and the khanqahs had gained considerable prestige. The khanqah al-Farafra, situated 100 meters north of the citadel in the prosperous Farafra quarter of the city, is one of the most significant institutions promoting the Sufi sect within Sunni Islam. On the face of it, Sufism was
an ally of the ruler and the principal enemy of the Sunni states was Shiite thought. Sufism was perhaps employed as a more constructive doctrine against the Shiites.

With external iwans, courtyards, gardens, pools and the decorative use of water, the madrassas of Ayyubid Aleppo shared with palatial architecture, attaining an official and distinctive paradisiacal allure\textsuperscript{123}. The utilization of plans and forms that had until the 12\textsuperscript{th} century been associated with royalty and state authority confirmed a definite transformation of the madrassas. While the madrassa’s religious status was often made explicit by the inclusion of a mosque and at times, a minaret, it began to play a distinctive role as an educational institution under official authority. Furthermore, while links with popular piety were reinforced by the frequent incorporation of mausoleums within the madrassas, they were often required to provide long-term housing for professors and students. As a result, many madrassas were equipped with rooms (more like cells) and water facilities for students and staff as well as larger residences for professors\textsuperscript{124}. By the Ayyubid era, the rigid plans of the early madrassa had given way to highly adaptable forms that accommodated pious and functional components of a more established institution while benefitting from official authoritative positions by virtue of its patrons. At the end of the Ayyubid rule, Aleppo had 214 mosques, 2 Friday (\textit{Jame’}) mosques and 51 madrassas among other important institutions and commercial facilities\textsuperscript{125}.

\textit{The Shrines and Associated Culture in Ayyubid Aleppo}

Attachment to the city’s commemorative history was relevant to the rulers’ legitimacy and authority in his reign over the city of Aleppo. As deep cultural and spiritual associations existed in specific locations in the city, linking them with numerous patriarchs, saints, Sufis, and other holy men whose charitable actions or miraculous acts were significant, Aleppans demonstrated a great commemorative tradition with these shrines\textsuperscript{126}. Numerous locations within the walled city as well as many extramural locations were protected through their association with a particular memory, event, or saint. A majority of the commemorative sites and shrines are concentrated in the Great Mosque, the citadel and the gates while surrounding suburbs carry the names of important Islamic figures, for example, Shaykh Abu Bakr, Shaykh Khidr, Shaykh Faris, Shaykh Maqsud, Sayyidna al-Husayn and \textit{al-Maqamat} (referring to Abraham)\textsuperscript{127}. Saints represented an important aspect of the cultural accumulation of this ancient city as understood by its people.

The Abrahamic shrines are among the most commemorative shrines in Aleppo. As Muslims considered Abraham to be the first monotheist and understood his religion to be the direct precursor of
Islam, any associations with Abraham within the city were highly venerated. As mentioned earlier, the city’s Arabic name is also thought to be linked to Abraham. Veneration of Abraham and other ancient prophets was driven by the traditionalist trends (revival of Sunni Islam) that were dominating the 12th century. The creation and restoration of these Abrahamic monuments served to establish a spiritual link with the great Prophet, further legitimizing the Ayyubid authority as well as engrossing Shiite traditions. The veneration of these shrines continues today and a cemetery around the maqamat is still considered among the most notable of the Aleppan cemeteries.

Prominent Shiite shrines in Aleppo include the Mashhad al-Dikka and the Mashhad al-Husayn. The Mashhad al-Dikka is the earliest known Shiite shrine in Aleppo, first built by the Hamdanid Shiite prince, Sayf-al-Dawla in the 10th century (See Appendix D, Figures 4 & 5). Believed to be the grave of an alleged son of al-Husayn (grandson of the Prophet Muhammad), the shrine was expanded and restored by al-Zahir Ghazi in the 12th century. This significant patronage of Shiite monuments was typical of the Ayyubid era in Aleppo, also seen with Mashhad al-Husayn, the construction of which was contracted by the Ayyubids (see Appendix D, Figures 1, 2, & 3). As Ibn al-Adim iterates, it was supposedly built after a dream that a certain shepherd had in order to commemorate al-Husayn. Considered as the largest most complex religious monument in Ayyubid Aleppo, it contained residential units for those who wanted to withdraw in the shrine. The Ayyubid rulers contributed to both Mashhads and had their names inscribed on them hoping to ingratiate themselves to the Shiite population while also stressing their own authority.

**Conclusion**

Cities within the Islamic domain differed distinctly from their medieval European counterparts primarily due to their lack of municipal institutions. Islamic cities were where one lived, not corporations to which one belonged. Inhabitants were town-dwellers or citizens only in the contextual sense of the word. There existed no municipalities that made laws and under whose jurisdiction one could come. A more centralized form of leadership united the inhabitants while the sultans and natives showed considerable attachment to the land and the maintenance of order and prosperity within it.

The various aspects of the Islamic city of Aleppo demonstrated in this paper support its status as a distinctively Islamic city. The development of numerous institutions within the city, all with their specific functional importance, and the growing inclination towards Sunni Islam transformed Aleppo into a thriving Islamic city during the Ayyubid era. The causative forms of some of these apparent
monuments and institutions served specific functions, as discussed previously, further emphasizing the significance of their presence in the Ayyubid city. The Ayyubid efforts focused within the city, developing its economic prosperity while constructing lasting architectural monuments. While power was primarily concentrated with the citadel, an extension of authority was diffused amongst the institutions, the tribunal (‘dar-al-adl’), the shrines and prominent quarters within the city. Court officials and patrician families enjoyed leaving behind a perpetuating commemoration of their family and ancestor through their patronage activities. While several aspects led to its success during the 12th and 13th centuries, the influence of the Ayyubid rulers was significant in steering it towards prosperity. The city of Aleppo, during the Ayyubid era, was a thriving center; a city by all definitions, complete with a stratified structure of society, complex functional institutions, a growing trade market, ample agricultural produce and centralized control with governors and military officials.
Endnotes

1 (Soberneim, 1921, p. 233)
2 (Russell, 1794, p. 34)
3 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 130)
4 (Lapidus, 1967, p. 93)
5 (Abu-Lughod, 1987, p. 163)
6 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 34)
7 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 131)
8 Translation and work discussed in (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 56)
9 (Bianca, David, Rizzardi, Beton, & Chauffert-Yvart, 1980, p. 11)
10 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 32)
11 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 67)
12 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 132)
13 (Zakkar, 1971, p. 96)
14 (Lapidus, 1967, p. 14)
15 (Zakkar, 1971, p. 94)
16 (Zakkar, 1971, p. 92)
17 (Zakkar, 1971, p. 90)
18 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 23)
19 (Soberneim, 1921, p. 233)
20 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 64)
21 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 24)
22 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 32)
23 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 24)
24 (Lyons, 1982, p. 196)
25 (Ehrenkreutz, 1972, p. 123)
26 (Lyons, 1982, p. 199)
27 (Ehrenkreutz, 1972, p. 123)
28 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 70)
29 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 71)
30 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 78)
31 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 70)
32 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 72)
33 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 35)
34 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 35)
35 (Morray, 1994, p. 23)
36 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 35)
37 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 132)
38 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 72)
39 (Bianca, David, Rizzardi, Beton, & Chauffert-Yvart, 1980, p. 12)
40 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 81)
41 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 135)
42 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 92)
43 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 133)
44 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 92)
45 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 141)
46 (Tabbaa, 1948, p. 93)
47 (Morray, 1994, p. 24)
48 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 64)
49 (Humphreys, 1977, p. 34)
50 (Ziadeh, 1953, p. 140)
51 (Kennedy, 2006, p. 92)
52 (El-Azhari, 2005, p. 128)
53 (El-Azhari, 2005, p. 140)
54 (Humphreys, 1977)
55 (Morray, 1994, p. 35)
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