Damascus: A Prize of Many Empires
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Damascus, the capital of Syria, is reputedly the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

The city, not far from the fierce fighting that has taken place in the hills of Galilee, is set among gardens and orchards. The beauty of its spires, rising out of their luxuriant setting, has won for the town, over the ages, the reputation of a paradise.

Syria has served as a land bridge between the Asian and African continents since the times of the Pharoahs. Damascus, the country's largest city and the seat of empire throughout history, has known many masters — Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Arab, Mameluke, Ottoman and French.

Damascus is situated in the Ghutah, a depression and oasis by the Barada and A'waj Rivers, at the foot of Mount Qasyun, on the eastern slopes of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains.

The city is astride the trans-desert routes and formerly was the rendezvous for the overland pilgrimage to Mecca, holy city of Islam. An ancient name for the city is "Gate of Mecca."

The city had a population in 1960 of 529,579, nearly double its 1946 population. Most of the inhabitants are Arabs, but there are large minorities of Druses, Kurds, Turks, Persians and Christian Maronites.

The old city, partly walled, lies south of the Barada River. Its medieval lines can be traced from the position of the gates and it appears to have been divided into several quarters, the Meiden quarter of the tribesmen, the Christian quarter to the northeast and next to it the Druse quarter.

The city has 250 mosques, the principal ones being in the old city. The most imposing building there is the Great Mosque, Jam Al Umawi or Al Aqsa, built in 705 within the wall of a first-century temple and replacing a church built in 379.

North of the Barada is the new city, with imposing Government buildings and with residential quarters built largely of stone and with shady avenues and gardens. In the western sector is the Syrian University established in 1924.

Josephus, the Jewish historian and soldier, who lived in the first century A.D., said the city known as Damascus was founded by Uz, son of Aram. It was already a city by the time of Abraham.

Overlooking the Barada are tombs cut out of the rock before the first millennium B.C. After that time Dimasqa, the ancient name, was the capital of a state called Ubi, a vassal of the Egyptian empire.

The city has been of political importance at various times in its long history. The first was at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. when the Aramaeans overran the area. It became the capital of their kingdom.

It headed a league of Syrian states against Shalmaneser III between 853 and 841 B.C., and was the most powerful and prosperous of them. But it fell to the Assyrians in 732 B.C. Under the Persian Empire, Damascus became a garrison city.

Alexander the Great's general, Parmenio, occupied the city without a struggle. On Alexander's death, the city once again became a prize of empire.

In 312 B.C. Ptolemy and Seleucus defeated Antigonus I Cyclops, Syria's ruler, and after 301 B.C. they established their control of the country. After that the city passed back and forth between the Egyptian and the Seleucid dynasties.

The Romans laid siege to the city and took it in 64 B.C. They held it until 31 A.D., when an Arab ruler, Aretas, took it on the death of Tiberius. It was during Aretas's reign that St. Paul was converted to Christianity on his way to the city.

The city was held by the Nabataeans until 105-106, when their lands were incorporated into the Roman Empire as a province of Arabia.

The Roman Emperor, Diocletian, contributed to the city's prosperity by establishing armament factories there.

With Christianity thriving there, the city became the seat of a bishop. But in 635 the city fell to invading Arab forces, and in 636, at the battle of Yarmuk, all Syria was won by the Arabs.

In 1154, Damascus fell to Nureddin and then to his successor, Saladin, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty of the Saracens and foe of the Crusaders. Then began a period of prosperity, religious culture and fine building that persisted through a brief occupation by the Mongols.

In 1260, the city was included in the Mameluke state of Egypt and Syria. It was devastated by Timur in 1401.

Selim I, Sultan of the Ottoman Turks, captured the city in 1516, and it became the capital of a Turkish province for 400 years and the departure point of the caravans to Mecca.

Except for the decade 1831-40, when Syria was incorporated in the Egyptian empire, Damascus remained Turkish until 1918. In that year, the city was occupied by the British and their Arab allies, headed by the Emir Faisal, later King of Saudi Arabia.

The French took over the city in 1920 under a League of Nations mandate, losing it in 1946 when it became the capital of the first independent state in its history, the Republic of Syria.

Syria joined Egypt as part of the United Arab Republic in 1958, but withdrew in 1961, and Damascus again became the capital of an independent Syria.

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