

A Roman monumental building in south-east Damascus?

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis¹ and Ross Burns²

Walls of a monumental building, apparently Roman in date, were found in the south-eastern section of the old city of Damascus in the basement of an Ottoman house during its conversion into a hotel in 2004–2011. The wall appears to be oriented to the Roman grid. The discovery of walls of a possible Roman monumental structure raises several important questions about the topography of this poorly understood part of ancient Damascus. This paper discusses the nature of the ashlar, notable for their size, their possible date and whether they were a part of a *gymnasium* constructed by Herod the Great.

Keywords Roman Damascus, Herod, *gymnasium*, monumental architecture

As Damascus is one of the longest continuously inhabited cities in the world (Ball 2000: 156–57), it is unsurprising that if one digs when laying foundations for a new building earlier remains of history appear before one's eyes. The recent renovation of Bayt al-Mu'allim Farhi, one of the most significant late Ottoman houses in the old city of Damascus, resulted in another discovery important for our understanding of ancient Damascus. This palatial residence has been known by other names through its history, including Bayt Farhi al-Mu'allim and Bayt al-Mu'allim; it will be referred to here as Bayt Farhi (Daskalakis 2004: 177–78; Keenan 2000: 94–96; Macaulay-Lewis; forthcoming; Sack 1989: 74, 113; Weber 2009: 253–56). Located in the Jewish Quarter (also known as Haret al-Jehud or Mahallat al-Yahud) in the south-eastern sector of the old city, Bayt Farhi belonged to the Farhi family from the late 18th century until 2004 when it was purchased for conversion into a boutique hotel (Bouchain 1996; Glain 2009; Philipp 1984: 37–52) (Figs 1–4). Completion of this project has been postponed indefinitely due to the current situation in the country.

The remains

During the renovation of Bayt Farhi, several sections of ancient masonry walls, composed of large ashlar, were discovered in the basement and in the service courtyard. A long stretch of a Roman wall, running east–west, was discovered in the basement. This wall appears to continue upwards into the walls of the southernmost room of the service (north) courtyard, a possible *ṭwān*, a common type of reception hall in Ottoman houses. The east–west wall appears to be aligned to Straight Street to its north and thus to the Roman city grid (see Fig. 2). Several other sections were also exposed on the ground-floor level. In the hallway that connects the service courtyard from the small third court, north of the main (east) and inner (west) courtyards in Bayt Farhi, a wall of exposed ashlar runs north–south. These blocks continue north into the south-eastern bedroom of the service courtyard. Significantly, those walls, like the basement wall, appear to be on the same orientation as Straight Street and the Roman grid. The discovery of a monumental Roman structure in the south-eastern quarter of old Damascus raises several important questions and informs us about the topography of this part of the ancient city, about which little is known. The remains of these walls will be described, before considering their possible date, their stratigraphic position relative to the Roman street grid and the type of building to which they may have belonged.

¹The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, 365 Fifth Avenue, Suite 4108, NY 10075, USA; email: emacaulay.lewis@gc.cuny.edu;

²Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University, P.O. Box 180, Hunters Hill, Sydney, NSW 2110, Australia

Ross Burns (corresponding author) Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University, P.O. Box 180, Hunters Hill, Sydney, NSW 2110, Australia; email: rossburns1943@gmail.com

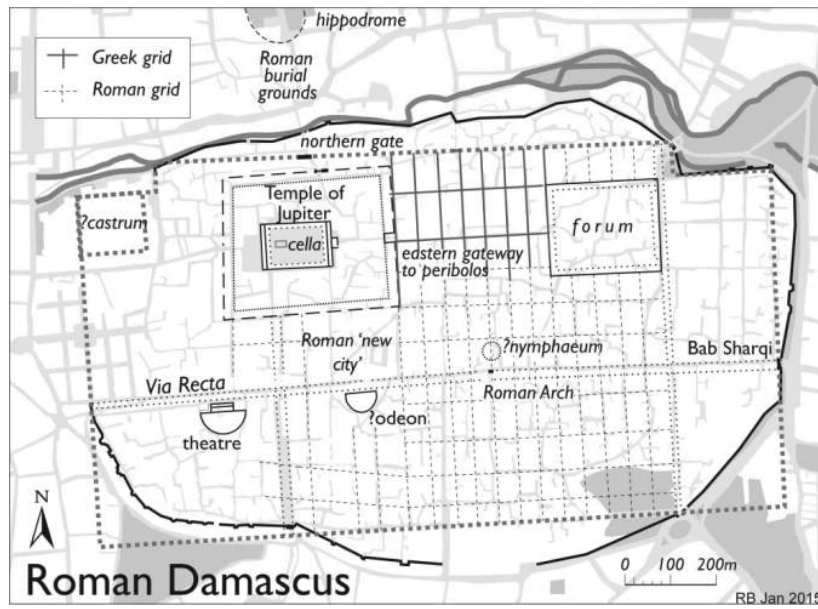


Figure 1 Map of Damascus (R. Burns).

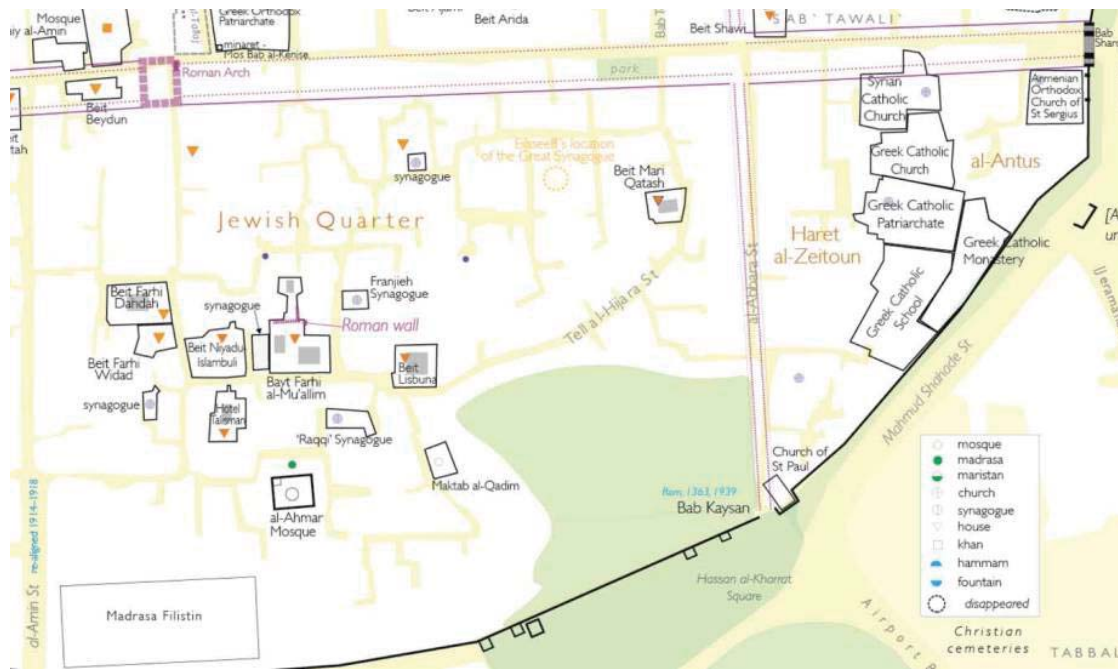


Figure 2 Detailed map of south-eastern quarter of old Damascus, showing the other known section of Roman masonry, or possible walls, in Jewish quarter. Beit is an alternative transliteration for bayt, or house in Arabic (R. Burns).

East-west wall in the basement

The large wall of ashlar was discovered running east-west when a long, thin pool for swimming lengths (henceforth, the lap pool) was installed in the basement of Bayt Farhi. This wall is visible for three courses. The exposed section is 15.48 m long and

2.22 m high, extending the full height from the top of the lap pool to the ceiling of the basement (Figs 5–9). The wall is approximately 2.5 m thick. The ashlar are of different lengths, and their heights are consistent, but the height of the individual courses varies from 0.45 to 0.50 m. There were two



Figure 3 The main (or east) courtyard of Bayt Farhi in 2011 (G. H. Lewis).

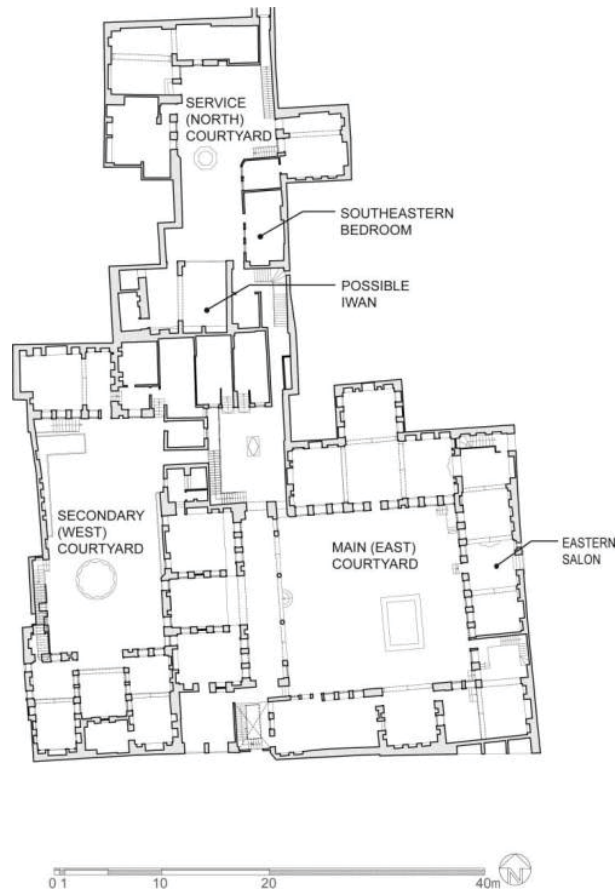


Figure 4 Ground plan of Bayt Farhi (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, *Building History Project*, after H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).

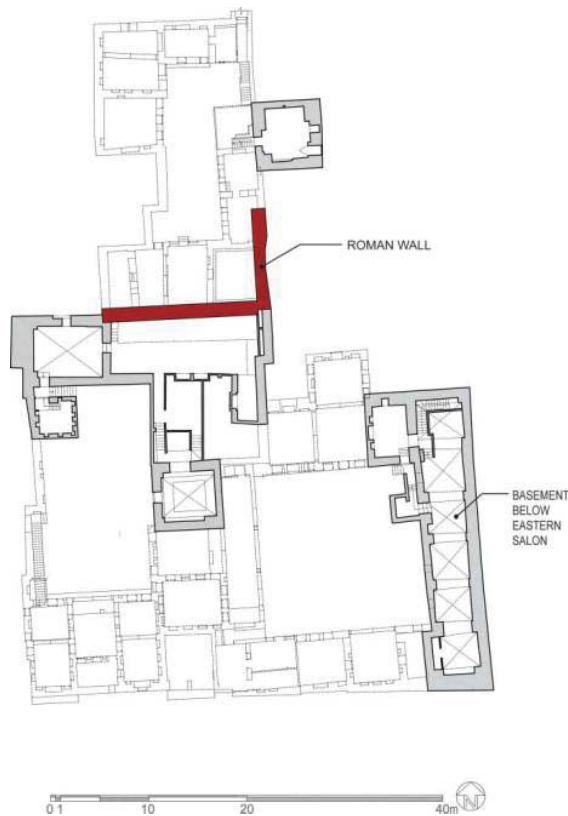


Figure 5 Location of the wall in Bayt Farhi in the basement and ground-floor levels (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, *Building History Project*, after H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).

large cuts, perhaps windows, through the blocks and courses. The western cut is 1.09 m wide, and the eastern cut is 1.18 m wide. These windows, probably a minimum of 1.7 m high, were later filled in with smaller stones and bricks. Part of one of the blocks, original to the wall, was apparently repositioned in the western window at a later date. The eastern window was filled in with smaller stones. Both windows begin about 0.50 m above the top of the lap pool. This would suggest that the wall probably

extended lower. However, due to the location of the modern lap pool it was not possible to determine the depth of the original base of the wall. In addition, a wall of this size would have had substantial foundations beneath it.

The presence of windows in the structure is interesting, as windows are rare in the ground floor of Roman buildings. If this building were a gymnasium, a possibility considered below, then there is some comparative evidence for windows on the ground floor of certain gymnasia/bath complexes in Asia Minor (Yegül 1992: 250–313). Most baths have windows at a higher elevation to allow in more air and light, as in the complex at Sardis (Yegül 1992: 271, fig. 334; 286, fig. 363). However, the baths of Vergilius Capito and its associated Hellenistic gymnasium in Miletus have a limited number of windows: one in the eastern apodyterium (1.5 m wide) and two in the western apodyterium (each 1.5 m wide), both of which allowed light from the palaestra into the apodyteria (Gerkan and Krischen 1928: 24, fig. 29). These windows are the best parallels for cuts or possible windows in the Roman wall at Bayt Farhi due to their size. However, the cuts in the Roman wall are much closer together than the pair of windows in the western apodyterium at the baths of Vergilius Capito, which are 5 m apart. The other windows in the baths are all clerestory windows at the levels of the domes, so their form and scale is not helpful as a reference point for understanding these possible windows. There also appear to be windows in the South Gate baths in Perge, but their elevation is unclear, although they are of a similar size (Yegül 1992: 296, fig. 384). Thus, these cuts in the Roman wall may have been windows; however, we must remain open to other possibilities because the evidence is fragmentary.

East-west wall in the service courtyard

At ground level in the service courtyard, the upward continuation of the wall is visible with further



Figure 6 Wall in the basement of Bayt Farhi with the edge of the lap pool in the foreground (G. H. Lewis).

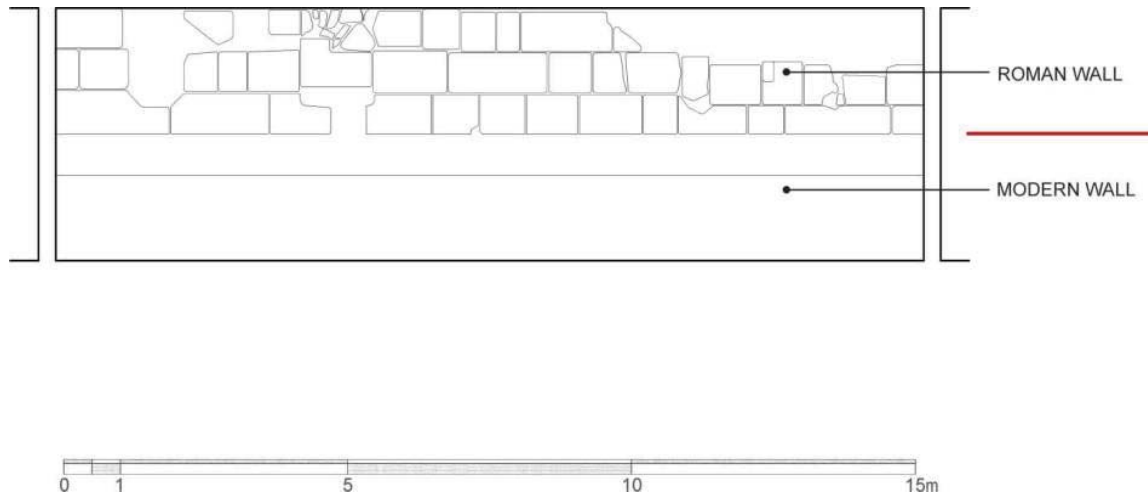


Figure 7 Elevation of the basement wall of Bayt Farhi with the edge of the lap pool at the bottom (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, *Building History Project*, after H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).



Figure 8 Westernmost section of the wall, note the filled-in windows (G. H. Lewis).

courses of ashlar in the southernmost room (the possible *ṭwān*) of the service courtyard. While only one course of blocks is exposed, this course is 0.52 m high. The tops of the blocks are visible, and the blocks appear to continue below floor level. Seven blocks to the east of the arch that divides the modern room are visible (Fig. 10) and three to the west of the arch are also visible (Fig. 11). The ashlar are of differing lengths, with the longest individual block being 1.04 m long (two cubits). A measurement of 0.52 cm equals one Egyptian cubit,

a standard Ptolemaic unit of measurement (McKenzie 2007: 446). During the renovations to Bayt Farhi, the southern face of these ashlar was also exposed (Fig. 12). A photograph, taken in 2006, clearly shows that they served as part of the construction materials of the Ottoman house and that the horizontal courses of Roman ashlar do not have masonry in between them. It may be that the ashlar were embedded into rubble, as part of the core of the double-faced ashlar work and then faced with blocks to create an *ablaq* stripe. The ashlar appear to be



Figure 9 Easternmost section of the basement wall (G. H. Lewis).

the core of the wall since the inner part of the wall projects out, as is visible in the left of the photograph. The lower course of wall also appears to continue into what is now the hall wall suggesting that it did reach the other section (Fig. 13).

Because the blocks are in poor condition and have been worn down, and because it is not possible to revisit the building, it is hard to determine whether the apparent use of the Egyptian cubit was highly significant. Many of the blocks lack dimensions based off either the Egyptian cubit or the Phoenician cubit (0.51 m), which is used at Palmyra. The total length of seven blocks to the east of the arch is 4.05 m, and the length of the three blocks to its west is 1.80 m. The two segments of wall (the basement section and

the section in the southernmost room of the service courtyard) were probably part of the same structure. The total height between the lowest course of masonry of the exposed pool-level wall and the top of the surviving ground-floor sections would be 2.74 m. It was not possible during our survey to determine the thickness of the floor and whether there may have been any additional blocks between the courses in the basement and in the southernmost room. The height of the ground floor in Bayt al-'Aqqad (see p. 10, under Comparative examples), which also has reused Roman ashlar in its walls, appears to be 0.38 m. If the floor height of the ground floor in Bayt Farhi is similar, then it is possible that the total height for the surviving east-west wall could be at least 3.12 m.



Figure 10 Eastern section of the wall in the southernmost bedroom (possible *iwān*) of the service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).



Figure 11 Western section of the wall in the southernmost bedroom (possible *iwān*) of the service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).

North–south wall

In the hallway linking the small, connective courtyard and the service courtyard on the ground floor of Bayt Farhi, three courses of exposed ashlar run north–south for 2.54 m, perpendicular to the east–west wall. The lowest course of partially exposed blocks is 0.58 m high. The middle course is 0.68 m high; the highest course, whose top is obscured by the modern staircase, is at least 0.44 m high. The total height of the three courses of ashlar blocks is at least 1.74 m high (including 0.03 m of mortar) (Fig. 14). The blocks continue into the south-eastern bedroom directly north of the hallway, where two segments of wall are still visible (Figs 15–17). The exposed

southern section, composed of three courses, is comparable in size (1.97 m long and 2.16 m high) to the basement wall segment. The lowest course is 0.72 m high; the middle is 0.58 m high; and the top course is 0.73 m high. This totals 2.13 m, including 0.03 m of mortar.

At 1.48 m north of these blocks, the second, smaller section of wall is preserved (0.72 m long and 0.5 m high). The total length of the wall, assuming that it was connected between these two sections, is 4.17 m. No traces of the wall are evident further north in the courtyard; there is a cellar located directly north in the path of the wall. The distance between the ashlar masonry in the hall and in the bedroom in the fourth



Figure 12 The south face of the ashlar in the southernmost bedroom (possible *iwān*) of the service courtyard in 2006, view looking northwards (S. Weber).



Figure 13 Detail of the southern side of the ashlars in the southernmost bedroom (possible *iwān*) of the service courtyard in 2006, view looking northwards. Note the continuation of the lower course of ashlars to the east (S. Weber).

courtyard is 1.92 m. The blocks in the bedroom are perfectly aligned with the blocks in the passageway. This suggests that the minimum total length of the north–south wall fragment is 8.06 m.

While the intersection of the walls running north–south and east–west is no longer visible, the ground plan of the restored basement shows that the likely combined length of the east–west wall is 17.4 m and the north–south wall is 12.5 m (see Fig. 5), with a maximum surviving height of 3.12 m for east–west wall and of 2.13 m for the north–south wall. Study

of the basement walls and of the north–south walls of the main and inner courtyards suggests that many of the walls of Bayt Farhi were aligned to the ancient grid. The wall that forms the major north–south section in the service courtyard and hallway may also continue southwards. The location of what is now a spa (the square room) to the south of the major east–west section of the Roman walls appears to be aligned to the grid as well, as does the small basement room in the inner (west) courtyard (Fig. 18). More ashlars may have been located in the basement



Figure 14 Three courses of ashlars in the hallway between the third courtyard and service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).



Figure 15 The wall in the south-eastern bedroom, the service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).

under the eastern salon of the main courtyard. The face of this wall, which runs for the length of the courtyard's eastern wall, runs parallel to the north-south wall that runs from the hall of a small, connective courtyard into the south-eastern bedroom. While we have not been able to work out the mathematical relationships between these walls (Fig. 19), the dimensions suggest that that these walls may have also been orientated to the Roman street grid.

Description of the ashlar

The ashlars are examples of large, high-quality masonry, although they are heavily worn. They were cut from local grey-white limestone. The stone is relatively soft and fine. The ashlars and courses are not perfectly shaped, and their faces are worn and uneven. They do not have consistent lengths. The courses also vary in height, but in each course, the blocks are of the same height. The joints are tight,



Figure 16 Detail, southern section of the wall in Fig. 13, south-eastern bedroom, the service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).



Figure 17 Detail, northern section of the Roman wall in Fig. 13, the south-eastern bedroom, the service courtyard (G. H. Lewis).

although there is mortar between the courses. This mortar appears to be modern and connected to the renovations of the Ottoman house. Therefore, the blocks do not appear to be reused. The blocks in the south-eastern bedroom have spaces in between them, where the stone is worn away, knocked or chiselled away, but which have not been filled in with mortar. This arrangement is similar to the appearance of many of the blocks in the ground-floor and basement levels of Bayt al-‘Aqqad, a Mamluk house, built on top of Herod’s theatre (see Freyberger 2005: 186–87, figs 128a, b).

There are neither distinctive nor consistent chisel marks on the blocks in Bayt Farhi. Furthermore, the blocks lack draughted margins. There is also no clear pattern of alternating courses of stretchers and headers, typical features of Herodian masonry (cf. Kropp and Lohman 2011). This would suggest that the blocks are not Herodian in date. However, the theatre of Herod, the only building in Damascus that we know Herod constructed, also lacks these features

(see the following section). Therefore, we cannot completely eliminate or endorse a Herodian date for the complex due to the lack of draughted masonry on the blocks. There were no finds associated with the walls that allow us to date them. The best way to date the blocks is through comparison with other examples of ancient monumental architecture in Damascus.

Comparative examples

The blocks are similar to the ashlar in surviving public Roman buildings in Damascus. The architecture of Herod’s theatre, which was identified during the restoration of Bayt al-‘Aqqad, the Danish Institute in Suq al-Suf, serves as a good starting point for comparison (Freyberger 2005: 181–201; Mortensen 2002: 121–29). The following parts of the theatre are still extant (Freyberger 2005: 181): the northern corner of the *pulpitum* by the eastern end of the *scaenae frons*; an arch, which belonged to the eastern end of the five *hospitalia* of the *scaenae frons*; and the eastern side of the *pulpitum*, which continues from the north-eastern corner on a straight line to the south. A wall supporting an arch is also evident to the south of this, and it probably covered the eastern *parodos* (Freyberger 2005: 181).

The ashlar of the theatre were dated by Freyberger to late 1st century BC by comparison with other public buildings that were erected in Damascus and with other buildings constructed by Herod in Syro-Palestine (Freyberger 2005: 187–91). The blocks are similar to those in Bayt Farhi, and they are made of the same grey-white limestone. Like the ashlar used in Bayt Farhi, the blocks used in the construction of the theatre and its *scaenae frons* have varying lengths and heights, ranging from 0.31 to 0.92 m (Freyberger 2005: 183–87, figs 124–129). While each course has a set height, the individual courses vary in height, as at Bayt Farhi. At Bayt al-‘Aqqad, the shortest course is 0.38 m high and the tallest is 0.62 m high (Figs 20, 21). The ashlar of the theatre do not feature any of the distinctive alternating courses of stretchers and headers that other Herodian architecture has in Jerusalem and in the platform of the Temple of Jupiter in Baalbek; furthermore, the blocks do not have draughted margins (Freyberger 2005: 183; cf. Kropp and Lohman 2011). This suggests that masonry of Herodian projects did not always have to have these distinctive features.

The Temple of Jupiter Damascenus, which is firmly dated to the early Imperial period, was used to date the theatre of Herod (Freyberger 1989: 61–86; 1999: 123–38; 2000: 212–17; 2005: 187; Seyrig 1950:

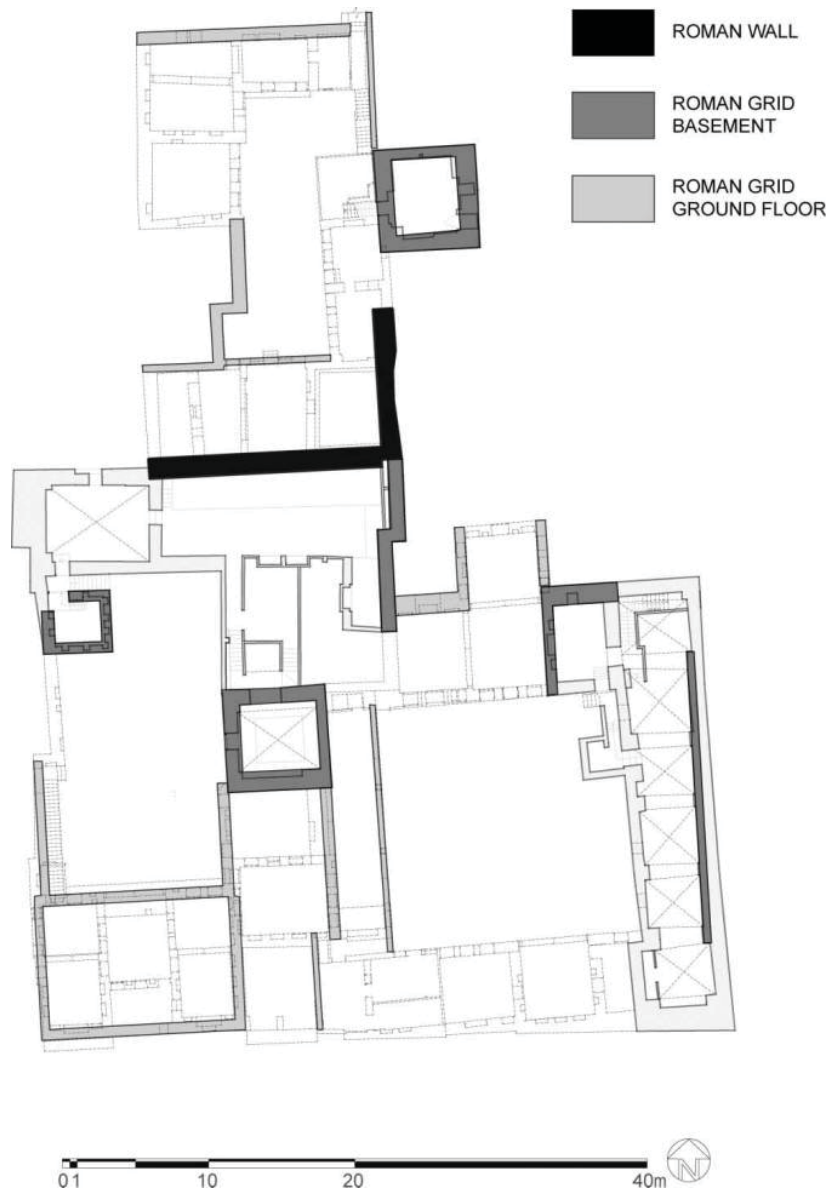


Figure 18 Plan of the basement level of Bayt Farhi. Note the close alignment of the Roman wall with the other basement walls marked (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, *Building History Project*, after H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).

34–37). Its ashlar is also good comparisons for those in Bayt Farhi, as it was also constructed of similar examples in grey-white limestone (Freyberger 2005: 187, fig. 132). The ashlar used in the construction of the eastern side of the north temenos outer wall are also similar (Freyberger 2005: 187; Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 24, fig. 22) (Fig. 22).

Comparable ashlar can also be seen today in the East Gate of the old city (henceforth, Bab Sharqi), where Straight Street terminates (Freyberger 1989: 86; 1999: 127, pl. 17a; 2005: 183; Sack 1989: fig. 6a–7a; Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 65–77, figs 38–45; Weber 1993: 152; Will 1994: 38–40,

fig. 15) (Fig. 23). The blocks of Bab Sharqi are larger than the ashlar found in Bayt Farhi and in Bayt al-‘Aqqad. On Bab Sharqi, the ashlar compose the thick walls and pillars that support the arches. Its ashlar have more consistent dimensions than those in Bayt Farhi. Freyberger argued that the blocks and structure of the gate ‘strongly resembles characteristics of Italian city gates dating to the Augustan Period’, specifically at the end of the 1st century BC and the beginning of the 1st century AD (Freyberger 1989: 86; 1999: 62; 2005: 187; cf. Burns 2007: 55, n. 25, for a summary of the debates over dating). However, Freyberger did not present any additional evidence

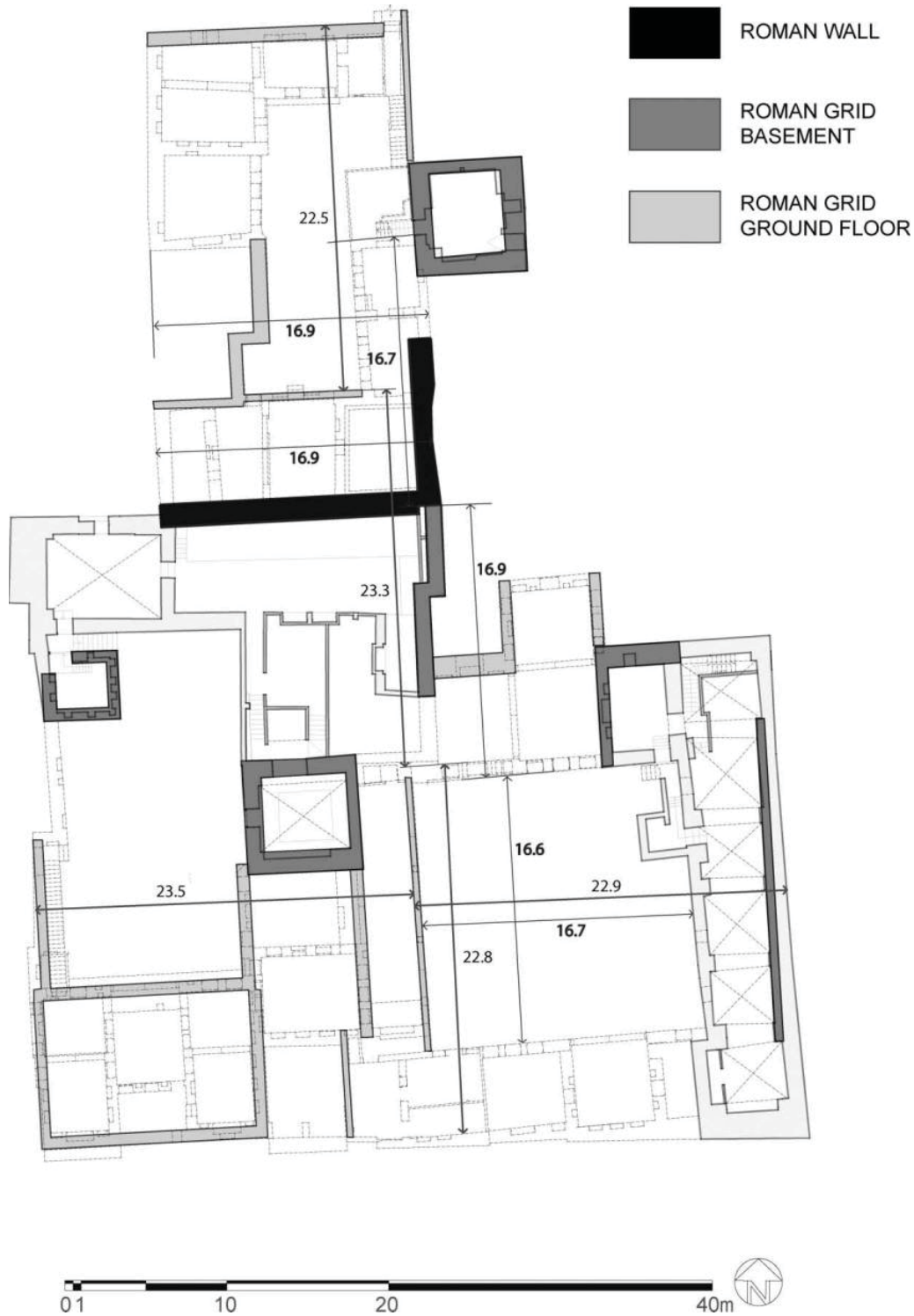


Figure 19 Plan of the basement levels of Bayt Farhi with measurements. While the relationships of alignments to the grid could not be completely determined, there seems to be some relationship between the grid and basement walls of Bayt Farhi (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, *Building History Project*, after H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).

for an Augustan date. The area around Bab Sharqi was lowered a small amount in the 1960s to expose more of the gate, and the upper parts have been

restored, but the ancient blocks are distinctive. Bab Sharqi has never been subjected to a rigorous scholarly investigation, but Mufti (1966: 29–36), in a short

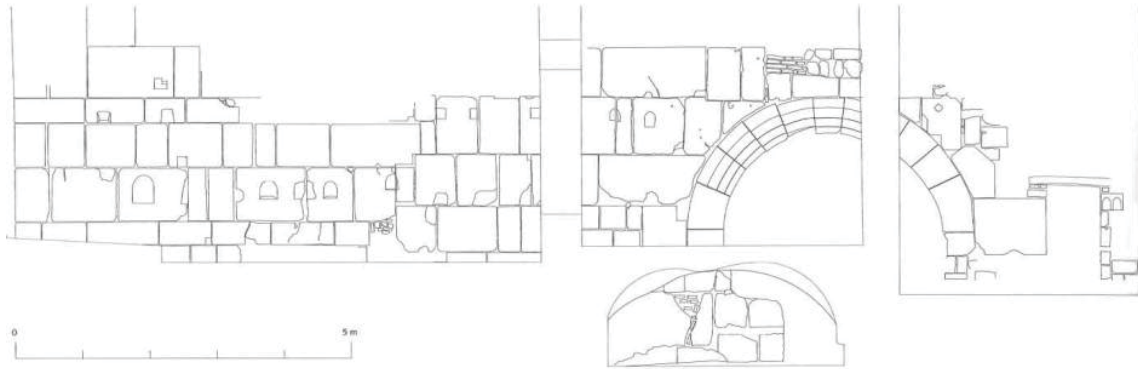


Figure 20 Elevation of one of the walls from Herod's theatre, facing the eastern sections of courtyard, Bayt al-'Aqqad (Freyberger 2005: 182, fig. 124, courtesy of P. Mortensen).

Arabic article on the restoration of Bab Sharqi, dates the arch to the Severan period and argues that a local architect built it; Watzinger and Wulzinger also assigned a Severan date (Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: 65).

Therefore, the date of Bab Sharqi is far from clear as neither Freyberger nor Mufti presents compelling evidence. On the basis of the present evidence, we can only identify the gate as Roman and cannot assign a date more specific than between the second-half of the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD. This reminds us that the dating of ancient monuments in Damascus is problematic and relatively uncertain due to our fragmentary evidence. Despite this, the ashlar of Bayt Farhi are similar in size, shape and

material to those in Herod's theatre, the Temple of Jupiter Damascenus, and Bab Sharqi. However, on the basis of the current evidence, it seems impossible to assign them more specifically than to the period between the second-half of the 1st century BC and 2nd century AD. These blocks probably belonged to an important monumental structure. However, the type of building to which this wall may have belonged and whether these blocks are currently in their original position or reused requires further comment.

Other sections of Roman walls south of Straight Street

Other stretches of Roman construction were reportedly found south of Straight Street in



Figure 21 The rear wall of *scaenae frons* of Herod's theatre, under Bayt al-'Aqqad (Freyberger 2005: 185, fig. 127, courtesy of P. Mortensen).



Figure 22 The wall of the outer temenos of the Temple of Jupiter Damascenus, Damascus (R. Burns).

Haret al-Jehud. According to Watzinger and Wulzinger, there were two sections of Roman wall, running north–south, found *in situ*, to the north and west of Bayt Farhi Dahdah, another Farhi house (Wulzinger and Watzinger 1924: 87, cat. no. H 5.5), but they refer only to it as ‘*antikes Mauerstück*’. When placed on a map, the remains of the wall running north–south in Bayt Farhi share the same exact north–south orientation as the wall segments near Bayt Farhi Dahdah, suggesting the north–south walls in Bayt Farhi may have been Roman (see Figs 1, 2, 16, 17). The wall to the east of Bayt Farhi

Dahdah is not visible today. We could not identify it amid the modern structures, nor is there a published picture of what Watzinger and Wulzinger saw. Another possible piece of an ancient wall was identified 100 m north of Bayt Farhi, and its position would be consistent with the southern limit of Straight Street (Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: pl. III).

However, it is unlikely that these segments of Roman wall were connected to the walls in Bayt Farhi. If these walls did connect, the size of the building would have been exceptionally large, about 125 ×



Figure 23 Bab Sharqi, the eastern gate of the old city of Damascus (E. Macaulay-Lewis).

150 m, making it similar in scale to the *temenos* of the Temple of Jupiter that was 100 × 155 m (Sauvaget 1949: 315).

Therefore it is unlikely that these sections of Roman wall located in Haret al-Jehud and Saghir connected with those in Bayt Farhi.

Roman blocks *in situ* or reused?

The stratigraphy and elevation of the walls in Bayt Farhi relative to other Roman streets, as well as other remains of the Roman walls and structure, provide compelling evidence that these walls are still in their ancient position. Their incorporation into the walls of the ground floor and the basement of Bayt Farhi is similar to the situation of the walls of Herod's theatre, which were incorporated into Bayt al-'Aqqad.

The surviving walls of Herod's theatre are about 4 m at their tallest. Many of these blocks were incorporated into the walls of Bayt al-'Aqqad's basement and ground-level rooms. During the early planning stages of the restoration of Bayt al-'Aqqad, large ashlar were discovered in the small courtyard. They were partially visible in the walls, which were only covered with a thick layer of clay plaster (Nielsen 2005: 203). Thus, the ashlar from Herod's theatre are positioned in a similar way to the ashlar in Bayt Farhi. They appear both in the walls of basements and continue in the walls of the ground-floor rooms.

In his 2005 study, Nielsen attempted to work out the position of the floor of the stage building and the orchestra, through a comparison of the extant remains to the proportions that were often used in the construction of Roman theatres (Nielsen 2005: 216). The elevation of the stage floor gives us a good indication of the ancient street level in this part of Roman Damascus; the orchestra floor of the theatre was slightly lower than the ancient street level at least (Nielsen 2005: 216). In Roman theatres, the relationship between the street level and the levels of the stage and orchestra floor was not fixed; sometimes the stage floor was at the ancient street level and other times the orchestra floor was.

Nielsen reasoned that the probable level of the stage floor was 1.8 m below the floor of the small courtyard, and the orchestra floor (which he calculated was 1.42 m below the stage floor) was 3.22 m below the floor of the small courtyard in Bayt al-'Aqqad (Nielsen 2005: 216). According to Nielsen's reconstruction, the stage floor of Herod's theatre was at the ancient Roman street level, or 1.8 m below the floor of the small courtyard, i.e., the ground-floor

level of Bayt al-'Aqqad (Nielsen 2005: 217, figs 141–142).

The south-eastern part of Roman Damascus was low-lying compared to the rest of the ancient city and close to the flood plain of the Barada River; this may mean that the ancient Roman street level in this part of town (719 m above sea level) was lower than at the western end of Straight Street (725 m above sea level). Bayt Farhi is also at a lower elevation than the present Bayt al-'Aqqad. The east–west wall in the basement of Bayt Farhi, which is at least 2.2 m below the ground floor of Bayt Farhi, is at a depth comparable to the deepest walls below the ground floor of Bayt al-'Aqqad. While we do not know the depth of the foot of the basement wall of Bayt Farhi, the presence of windows and windowsills suggests that the wall continued down, but not too much further. Both Bayt Farhi and Bayt al-'Aqqad, as discussed above, have the top parts of the ashlar walls in the basement extending up into the ground-floor walls. Thus, the relative stratigraphy of the two houses, which contain ashlar in their basements and ground-floor walls, would appear to confirm that the ancient walls lay at approximately the same position relative to the ancient ground level in each case.

In other cities with continuous habitation since Roman times, the walls in basements and the lower part of the ground floor are often at a Roman street level. In Rome, the vaults from theatre of Pompey can be found in the cellar rooms of restaurants and in the walls of the hotel, Albergo Sole al Biscione (Gagliardo and Packer 2006: 96–98, fig. 2; Masson 1983: 136), and the situation is the same in Jerusalem. The Roman elevations of the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem were only reached by removing Umayyad layers (Wightman *et al.* 1989: 35–38). Granted, we do not know how much deeper the wall in the basement of Bayt Farhi continued. Only further exploration would allow us to establish this.

On the basis of the current evidence, it seems most likely that these Roman blocks were left *in situ* (see Figs 12, 13) and were used as a foundation wall for a later Mamluk or Ottoman house, prior to being used as foundations in Bayt Farhi. The ground floors of Mamluk and Ottoman houses were constructed of stone, which was then dressed, plastered and painted. The construction of houses in Mamluk and Ottoman Damascus regularly reused masonry from earlier constructions. Sometimes these blocks were not moved, as in the case of Herod's theatre (Weber and Mortensen 2005: 230–47). The structure of Bayt Farhi, which was constructed between 1780 and around 1800, was probably built out of those earlier houses. This

Roman wall is along what may have been a boundary wall between two houses that were combined to create Bayt Farhi.

Herod's *gymnasium*?

When the wall was discovered during the renovations of Bayt Farhi, it was suggested that the wall could have belonged to Herod's *gymnasium* (D. Sack, pers. com.). This suggestion is intriguing and worthy of further examination, as scholars have long wondered where this important building was located. Herod the Great, was an active builder both within the bounds of his kingdom and in the neighbouring realms (Netzer 2008: 237–40; Roller 1998). Josephus, writing in the 1st century AD, reports that

After founding all these places, he [Herod] proceeded to display his generosity to numerous cities outside his realm. Thus, he provided *gymnasias* for Tripoli, Damascus and Ptolemais, a wall for Byblus, halls, porticoes, temples, and market-places for Berytus and Tyre, theatres for Sidon and Damascus, an aqueduct for Laodicea-on-Sea, baths, sumptuous fountains and colonnades, admirable alike for their architecture and their proportions, for Ascalon; to other communities he dedicated groves and meadow-land. (Josephus, *BJ*, I.422–3; Revised 1997, trans. by Thackeray)

Here Josephus credits Herod with constructing a *gymnasium* and a theatre in Damascus. He is our only source for these monuments and does not give any further details about their construction, date or appearance (Netzer 2008: 237–40). Could the monumental wall beneath Bayt Farhi belong to Herod's *gymnasium*, which hitherto has never been located?

As many of the buildings that Josephus describes did exist and have been found (Netzer 2008: 237–40), there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Josephus' list of projects. However, he includes little information on the location and appearance of the buildings. Thus, at present, there is not sufficient evidence to associate the walls in Bayt Farhi with Herod.

No archaeological evidence for the other *gymnasium* that Herod reportedly constructed in Tripoli, Lebanon, has survived to provide comparanda (Netzer, 2008: 238), and little is known of Ptolemais (ancient Acre) in the Roman period (Ball 2000: 177; Goldmann 1993: 23). Therefore, we do not have any *gymnasias* we can compare with the walls in Bayt Farhi. The surviving walls in Bayt Farhi lack any features or finds could enable us to identify the function or nature of the building to which they belonged.

As noted above, the Herodian theatre in Damascus did not employ masonry with draughted margins, often identified as a characteristic of Herodian architecture. The lack of draughted masonry may serve as an argument against a Herodian date *per se*; however, it should be noted that the blocks of Herod's theatre do not contain draughted masonry, although some clearly have been worked. This suggests that Herodian masonry could be undraughted in certain contexts.

Roman remains in the context of the Jewish Quarter (Haret al-Jehud) by Ross Burns

The area of Damascus traditionally known as Haret al-Jehud, Mahallat al-Yahud or the Jewish Quarter, occupies most of the south-eastern part of the city south of the main east-west cross street, Straight Street (see Figs 1, 2). Despite its name, Straight Street bends slightly with the deflection disguised by the Roman Arch that marks approximately the mid-way point of Straight Street. The south-eastern segment reaches the city walls as they curve round the city arriving at their easternmost point at Bab Sharqi.

Given its topography, it is probably not surprising that it was the last of the city's quaterles to be developed in a consolidated fashion. Even long after the city had spread outside the walls along corridors to the north (Salihyeh), west (Saruja) and south (Midan), this zone remained a low priority for monumental enhancement, due to the fact that it served to house many of the workshops associated with Jewish craftsmen until the Jewish banking family, the Farhis, constructed two major residences in this area. It then attracted a range of other major domestic palaces in the area and, in turn, associated synagogues.

The first Jewish community in Damascus was possibly the result of the exiles' return route from Babylon. The community was sizeable in the Roman period but had dwindled by the Arab middle ages. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, many Sephardic Jews were given refuge in Arab lands, particularly after Syria came under Ottoman control from 1517. For the next five centuries, the community in Damascus comprised both Sephardic and local communities (Mizrahim). Though the estimates of the community as reported in travellers' accounts vary markedly (Mouton 1994: 348), they peak around 5000 in Damascus by the 16th century at which point the city's total population may have reached 65,000 (Burns 2007: 233; on travellers' accounts of the size and condition of the Jewish

community, see Lewis 1939: 179–84). Though the Jewish community has now largely gone, its two main synagogues survived, in good condition, as of April 2012.

Although the Jewish Quarter occupies a fairly large part of the walled city, much of that land immediately within the walls is low-lying and close to the flood plain of the Barada River, flowing just beyond the eastern walls. Until recently, this area lying within Bab Kaysan, the gate popularly associated with St Paul's escape from the 'Nabataean Quarter', was occupied by orchards. However, the zone immediately south of Bab Sharqi (al-Zeitoun and al-Antus) came to house the main churches of several Christian denominations after the burning of the Bab Tuma Quarter in 1860 (Sack 1989: 68). The flooding problem (and possible malaria risks) might partly explain the apparent lack of interest in monumental architectural projects in this fringe area until the 18th century.

Nevertheless, the quarter had clearly been in use as far back as Roman times. In those parts of the quarter away from the low-lying land, there are indications in the street pattern that a proportion of modern lanes may reflect a grid going back to the city's classical footprint. The segments of streets that could be assigned to the grid are marked on the map in Fig. 2. The area of 'unused land' shown on the map was more extensive 100 years ago. In the first map of the city, resulting from German researches during the First World War (Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921; Wulzinger and Watzinger 1924), the unused land stretched as far west as the main north-south cross street, meeting the central Roman Arch on Straight Street. In the 1930s, the western edge of this area was built over to provide a high school for the city's Jewish community (today the Madrasa Filistin).

The city's traditional Jewish Quarter in its historic dimensions has some unusual features. Most notable is the fact that the buildings of the quarter are comparatively recent, with virtually only one structure attested before the 18th century. A 12th century AD Jewish source, Benjamin of Tudela, records that the Great Synagogue in Damascus had been built in the 1st century AD, but we have no indication as to its location in the city (Mouton 1994: 348 and n. 83). The modern Ahmar Mosque was built in the Jewish Quarter in its original form in the 12th century on the site of a synagogue (Elisséeff 1959: 106; Hanauer 1924: 77; Mouton 1994: 348 and n. 83). The only surviving synagogue known to date back before the 19th century is the ancient synagogue still found in the nearby village of Jobar (Lewis 1939: 179–84),

which is now swallowed by the Damascus conurbation. There was also a late Mamluk Samaritan synagogue in Damascus; however, its location is unclear (Tropper 1995: 118–34).

Moreover, it seems clear that the city walls have long enclosed this area.

Recent probing around the base of the south walls, at the time of the construction of a flyover system for the airport freeway, exposed Zengid/Ayyubid city walls.

These were built in two phases on a base provided by Roman limestone blocks possibly reused but resting on material dated to the 3rd century AD (Braune 2008).

Firm evidence for the classical era use of the south-east quarter is extremely fragmentary. These fragments include:

- Evidence of a Roman gateway on the south-eastern walls at Bab Kaysan, later replaced with a Mamluk gate itself radically rebuilt in the 1930s to serve as a Christian chapel commemorating St Paul's escape from the city in a basket lowered over the walls. The chapel makes extensive use of classical blocks but virtually none is *in situ*. Most of the material has been re-positioned, probably a little to the east of the Roman gate marking the southern end of the eastern *decumanus* running from Bab Tuma or St Thomas' Gate in the north.
- During the First World War, the German researchers Watzinger and Wulzinger mapped two 'pilasters' on the foldout map in their first publication, which they assumed to be part of another gate on the southern walls, meeting the street (interpreted on their map as a *decumanus*) coming from the Roman Arch (Watzinger and Wulzinger 1921: tafel III).
- Watzinger and Wulzinger included other fragments of classical masonry or column pieces as marked on the map accompanying *Damaskus – Islamische Stadt* (Wulzinger and Watzinger 1924). Perhaps the most interesting is the section of wall catalogued as item I 5.1, which they assumed gave the alignment of the southern edge of Straight Street as developed to form a colonnaded avenue in the Roman period.
- The central Roman Arch on Straight Street, probably a quadrifons marking a slight deflection in the street's path, was partly reconstructed in the 1930s without any attempt to gather archaeological evidence (Burns 2007: 56).
- The arch gives clear confirmation that the city's broad cross street was colonnaded and met an important north-south street at this point, lining up with the pilasters detected by Watzinger and Wulzinger (above).

In spite of these indications that the quarter had been incorporated in the walled urban footprint in its Roman formation, we have few indications from archaeological or written sources, or the present building inventory, as to how the quarter was used before the 18th century. There are no indications that the quarter housed substantial public institutions such as the public bath, schools (*yeshivas*) or major *suqs* and warehouses (*khans*) that are found in other parts of the city. The 12th century Arab author, Ibn 'Asakir (for translation, see Elisséeff 1959) and the surveys by Écochard and Le Coeur (1942–43), Pouzet (1991: 334) and Sack (1989) all observe that there was only one synagogue recorded in the area in the 13th century apart from the structure replaced by the Ahmar Mosque (or Mosque al-Shahrazuri).

The synagogue replaced by the Ahmar Mosque is a Byzantine building, which lies one street south of Bayt Farhi. The present mosque on the site is a modern structure (1979–81) replacing a predecessor, which had long fallen into ruin. The first mosque had been built by a *qadi* of Damascus under Nur al-Din. Sack notes that the mosque was built on the site of a Byzantine synagogue (Sack 1989: 100), perhaps confirming that the Jewish associations of the area go back many centuries and not only to the arrival of the Sephardic refugees under the Ottomans.

Macaulay-Lewis' work, however, gives us an important new piece of evidence of the quarter's early centuries. In itself, the presence of a substantial number of Roman blocks is by no means unique in the city. What is most interesting, though, is the orientation of the wall. A possible reconstruction of the Roman grid in this area is seen in Fig. 1. While it is not bordered by any of the likely Roman streets in the area, the wall is precisely aligned to the grid that takes its orientation from Straight Street east of the Roman arch (see Figs 2, 18, 19). This may simply be a coincidence reflecting the likelihood that the influence of the grid, which appears to be dominant in this area, extends even within the *insulae*. The only part of the south-eastern quartile, which does not have evidence of a pre-existing grid is the low-lying zone against the south-eastern walls used for agricultural purposes. Bayt Farhi provides the first evidence of a major project in an area that has long been virtually a *tabula rasa* in our understanding of the classical city.

Conclusions

The discovery of a monumental Roman building in the south-eastern part of the old city tells us several important things about Roman Damascus. The depth of the walls in Bayt Farhi's basement and their height suggest

that the walls stand at an ancient Roman level. The Bayt Farhi ashlar are similar to those used in the Roman-era theatre, temple and city gates. Furthermore, the walls are oriented to the Roman city grid. This part of the city may have had some type of monumental public architecture, on a scale comparable to other parts of the city. By the Augustan era, the city had a hippodrome, a theatre, an odeon, a major temple complex and an agora (Burns 2007: 54–58, 61–72). In other words, Damascus had most of the major types of Roman public buildings. There are a few building types from the Greco-Roman repertoire that have not been discovered in Damascus, notably a *gymnasium* and a bath complex. However, we do not have any firm archaeological evidence that the Roman walls in Bayt Farhi belonged to a *gymnasium* or bath complex.

This is a provisional report. Ideally, more work could have been done on documenting and researching this wall and other possible fragments of ancient masonry in the Jewish Quarter. However, the current political situation prevented this. Further excavation and study of the south-eastern corner of old Damascus should bring additional insights into, and an enhanced understanding of, the urban development and topography of Roman Damascus. However, on the basis of our current knowledge, it is reasonable to identify the large ashlar walls in the basement and northern courtyard of Bayt Farhi as Roman walls belonging to a monumental public structure that was constructed sometime between the second half of the 1st century BC and the late 2nd century AD.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank numerous people for their assistance with this study. A great debt of thanks is owed to Ayman Asfari for allowing EML to study Bayt Farhi and to Hani Asfari for all of his support while EML was in Damascus. A conversation with Dorothee Sack over whether this structure was Herod's gymnasium inspired the writing of this article; we thank her for this interesting suggestion. Our discussions with Judith McKenzie about the Roman grid were particularly fruitful, and she deserves special mention here. The comments of Associate Editor Kevin Butcher and *Levant's* anonymous reviewers were incredibly helpful. The work of Jason Montgomery and Jeffery Burden of the Building History Project on the plans and elevations that appear in this article was critical. EML would like to thank Hakam Roukbi, Kathryn Gleason and Barbara Burrell for their assistance and advice.

Many thanks also go to Dragana Mladenović and Sean Leatherbury, who read drafts of this article. Lastly, thanks to George Lewis, whose photographs appear here, and who served as an excellent assistant in Damascus in February 2011. EML wrote the first section, while RB wrote the section on the Bayt Farhi and the evolution of the Jewish Quarter. Both authors contributed to the conclusions. Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

References

- Ball, W. 2000. *Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire*. London: Routledge.
- Bouchain, J. D. 1996. *Juden in Syrien: Aufstieg und Niedergang der Familie Farhi von 1740 bis 1995*. Hamburg: Hamburger islamwissenschaftliche und turkologische Arbeiten und Texte.
- Braune, M. 2008. Die Stadtbefestigung Von Damaskus. In: Piana, M. (ed.), *Burgen Und Städte Der Kreuzzugszeit*: 202–11. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag.
- Burns, R. 2007. *Damascus: A History*. London: Routledge.
- Daskalakis, A.-C. 2004. *Damascus 18th and 19th Century Houses in the Ablaq-'Ajami Style of Decoration Local and International Significance*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services.
- Écochard, M. and Le Coeur, C. 1942–43. *Les Bains de Damas*. Beirut: Institut français de Damas.
- Elisséeff, N. (ed.) 1959. La description de Damas. Translated by Elisséeff, N. Damascus: Institut français de Damas.
- Freyberger, K. S. 1989. Untersuchungen zur Baugeschichte des Jupiter-Heiligtums in Damaskus. *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 4: 61–86.
- 1999. Untersuchungen zur Baugeschichte des Das kaizerzeitliche Damaskus: Schauplatz lokaler Tradition und auswärtiger Einflüsse. *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 11: 123–38.
- 2000. Das Heiligtum des Jupiter Damaskenus – ein Städtischer Kultbau lokaler Prägung. In: Gaube, H. and Fansa, M. (eds), *Damaskus – Aleppo: 5000 Jahre Stadtentwicklung in Syrien*. *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Nordwestdeutschland Beiheft* 28: 212–17. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.
- 2005. The theatre of Herod the Great in Damascus: chronology, function and significance. In: Mortensen, P. (ed.), *Bayt al-'Aqqad. The History and Restoration of a House in Old Damascus. Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus 4*: 181–201. Beirut: American University of Beirut.
- Gagliardo, M. and Packer, J. E. 2006. A new look at Pompey's theater: history, documentation and recent excavation. *American Journal of Archaeology* 110(1): 93–122.
- Gerkan, A. and Krischen, F. 1928. *Thermen und Palaestren*. Berlin: H. Schoetz and Co., G. M. B. H.
- Glain, S. 2009. In Damascus, restoring Beit Farhi and the City's Jewish past – an architect works to restore the grand palace of Raphael Farhi, one of the most powerful men in the Ottoman world. *Smithsonianmag.com* 11. <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/In-Damascus-Restoring-Beit-Farhi-and-the-City-Jewish-Past.html>> [accessed 15 May 2013].
- Goldmann, Z. 1993. Tel Acco. In: Stern, E., Levinzon-Gilbo'a, A. and Aviram, J. (eds), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*: 17–23. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Carta.
- Hanauer, J. E. 1924. Damascus: notes on changes made in the city during the Great War. *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*: 68–78.
- Josephus, 1997. *The Jewish War*. Revised edition translated by Thackeray, H. St. J. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Keenan, B. 2000. *Damascus – Hidden Treasures of the Old City*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Kropp, A. J. M. and Lohman, D. 2011. 'Master, look at the size of those stones! Look at the size of those buildings!' – Analogies in construction techniques between the temples at Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Jerusalem. *Levant* 43(1): 38–50.
- Lewis, B. 1939. A Jewish source on Damascus just after the Ottoman conquest. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 10(1): 179–84.
- Macauley-Lewis, E. forthcoming. *Bayt Farhi and the Sephardic Palaces of Ottoman Damascus in the Late 18th and 19th Centuries*. Manar al-Athar Monograph No. 3.
- Masson, G. 1983. *The Companion Guide to Rome*. 6th US Ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall; London: Collins.
- McKenzie, J. 2007. *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, c. 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mortensen, P. 2002. A note on the theatre of Herod the Great in Damascus. In: Oates, D. and al-Gailani Werr, L. (eds), *Of Pots and Plans: Papers on the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia and Syria Presented to David Oates in Honour of his 75th Birthday*: 121–29. London: NABU.
- Mouton, J.-M. 1994. *Damas et sa Principauté sous les Saljoukides et les Bourides (468–549/1076–1154): Vie Politique et Religieuse*. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.
- Mufti, A. 1966. The restoration of Bab Sharqi. *Annales archéologiques arabes syriennes* 16: 29–36. (In Arabic).
- Netzer, E. 2008. *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Nielsen, T. F. 2005. The Roman theatre: historical context and reconstruction. In: Mortensen, P. (ed.), *Bayt al-'Aqqad: The History and Restoration of a House in Old Damascus. Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus IV 2005*: 203–26. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Philipp, T. 1984. The Farhi Family and the changing position of the Jews in Syria, 1750–1860. *Middle Eastern Studies* 20(4): 37–52.
- Pouzet, L. 1991. *Damas au VIIe–XIIIe siècle: vie et structures religieuses d'une métropole islamique*. Beirut: Dar el-Machreq.
- Roller, D. W. 1998. *The Building Program of Herod the Great*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sack, D. 1989. *Damaskus: Entwicklung und Struktur einer orientalisch-islamischen Stadt*. Mainz am Rhein: Philipp von Zabern.
- Sauvaget, J. 1949. Le plan antique de Damas. *Syria* 26: 314–58.
- Seyrig, H. 1950. Antiquités syriennes – 42. Sur les ères de quelques villes de Syrie. *Syria* 27: 5–56.
- Tropper, J. 1995. Die samaritanischen Inschriften des Pergamonmuseums. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 111(2): 118–34.
- Watzinger, C. and Wulzinger, K. 1921. *Damaskus, die Antike Stadt*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Weber, T. 1993. Damaskos Polis Episemos, hellenistische, römische und byzantinische Bauwerke in Damaskus aus der Sicht griechischer und lateinischer Schriftquellen. *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 7: 135–76.
- Weber, S. 2009. *Damascus Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transform (1808–1918)*. 2 Vols. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- and Mortensen, P. 2005. The Bayt al-'Aqqad between the 15th and 18th Century. In: Mortensen, P. (ed.), *Bayt al-'Aqqad: The History and Restoration of a House in Old Damascus. Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus 4*: 227–80. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Wightman, G. J., Hennessy, J. B. and Bennett, C. M. 1989. *The Damascus Gate, Jerusalem: Excavations by C.-M. Bennett and J. B. Hennessy at the Damascus Gate, Jerusalem, 1964–66*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.
- Will, E. 1994. Damas antique. *Syria* 71: 1–43.
- Wulzinger, K. and Watzinger, C. 1924. *Damaskus, die Islamische Stadt*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Yegül, F. K. 1992. *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Architectural History Foundation.