

Scenes of Syria

2. Great Umayyad Mosque, Damascus

Judged by sheer size, this is surely the most impressive building in Damascus. The huge courtyard, 122 metres by 50 metres and paved with polished marble to produce dazzling reflections of the surrounding columns, forms only a part of the mosque, as the covered prayer hall (beneath the dome on the right) is almost as large. Yet even the whole complex is just a fraction of the size of earlier buildings on the site, which have their beginnings in Biblical times.

A temple was built here in the ninth century B.C. by the Arameans (AV Syrians) to their god Hadad, whose name was adopted by Old Testament kings like Hadadezer ('Hadad is helper') and Benhadad ('son of Hadad'). The Romans rededicated the temple to their own chief god Jupiter, and in Roman times it reached its maximum size, measuring no less than 385 metres by 300 metres (29 acres)—this is how it would have appeared when the Apostle Paul visited Damascus. This was supplemented in the fourth century A.D. by a Christian church dedicated to John the Baptist. John's alleged head is preserved

here (although, as it's one of four throughout the world, we needn't worry about its genuineness!).

After the Islamic conquest of the Eastern Roman Empire, Christians and Muslims initially worshipped here side by side. Eventually, however, Islam gained the upper hand, and Christians were expelled. In the eighth century the Umayyad caliph built most of what is visible today as a sign of rising Muslim power. No expense was spared on the magnificence of the mosque, which sapped the entire revenue of Syria for seven years.

The changes which have taken place on this spot over nearly 3,000 years are a good illustration of the rise and fall of short-lived human powers, a pattern we are familiar with from Scriptures like Daniel 2. Each one builds on what it inherits, absorbing earlier philosophies and beliefs, until the coming of the Stone which will grind them all to powder when God's Kingdom is established.

—Jeremy Thomas



Picture: Marel Pike