PART A

INTRODUCTION

Cities are dwelling places that nations use when they have reached the
desired goal of luxury and of the things that go with it.

– Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima*

The city, as one finds in history, is the point of maximum concentration
for the power and culture of a community.

– Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities*

THE UNDERLYING ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

The Mamluk City in the Middle East is a historical, cultural, and geo-
graphic study of Syria, *Bilād al-Shām*, during the Mamluk period (1260–
1517). This work constitutes both a reading and rendition of the urban
history, urban experience, and nature of urbanism in this region under the
Mamluk Sultanate. More specifically, this analysis "visits" the less-known
provincial Mamluk cities in the region, with an emphasis on Jerusalem,
Safad, and Tripoli. By concentrating on the cultural urban landscape and
scrutinizing its built environment, I offer a new approach and method-
ology for reading historical cities.

Throughout the pages of this study, the Mamluk city is portrayed
through three lenses: the tangible, the socially constructed, and the con-
ceptualized. By dint of a comparison of mostly provincial cities of *al-Shām*,
as well as insights from other cities, I establish the very existence of the
Mamluk city and demonstrate that there was indeed a sense of Mamluk
urbanism. Furthermore, the book addresses the conceptual model of "the

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Islamic city." I contend that the urban expanses of *Bilād al-Shām*, like the cities of any other region, are the outcome and processes of multiple forces that have conjointly and perpetually shaped them. By exploring these cities in their historico-cultural context and by engaging overarching urban theories, I hope to emancipate Mamluk, Islamic, and Middle Eastern cities from generalizations past and demonstrate that they are indeed full-fledged cities.

The creation and consolidation of the Mamluk Sultanate, followed by the final blow to the Crusader kingdom and the expulsion of the Mongols, contributed directly to Syria's transformation into a coherent political and administrative unit.[1] For almost 270 years, the area (*al-Shām*) was under the aegis of the Cairo-centerd Mamluk bureaucracy and the imperial army.[2] The Mamluk sultanate was thus *al-Shām*'s longest successive period in which the entire region shared the same political history since the Islamic conquest of the seventh century AD. This run of stability enables us to conduct a research study on the nature of cities (i.e., their urban features, institutions, urban policies) within the same geographical region during a distinct historical epoch. Notwithstanding Ira Lapidus's seminal works in the late 1960s on economic, social, and political life in cities under the control of the Mamluk sultanate and the significant rise in works on the sultanate's history, architecture, and art over the past few decades, scholars have yet to research in a comprehensive manner urbanism and the urban history of *al-Shām* during the Mamluk period.

From the dawn of civilization, the city has always been the place in which societies and cultures reach their peak. The crux of Ibn Khaldun's urban theory is that the city is a superior cultural phenomenon, one that represents the most sophisticated level that any culture can achieve. Likewise, Park notes that "with all their complexities and artificialities," cities are "man's most imposing creation, the most prodigious of human artefacts."[3]

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[1] In her analysis of the Aleppan scholar 'Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād's *A'lāq al-Khaṭīra*, Antrim suggests that it is only during the Mamluk period that one can uphold Syria as a fully fledged region. See, Z. Antrim, "Making Syria Mamluk: Ibn Shaddād's A'lāq al-Khaṭīrah," *MSR* 11/1 (2007): 1–18.

[2] In his invariably persuasive manner Ayalon writes: "The history of the Mamluk military aristocracy was, therefore, first and foremost, the history of the aristocracy within the narrow confinement of Cairo." D. Ayalon, "The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 320.

[3] R. E. Park, "The City and Civilization," in E. C. Hughes et al. (eds.), *Human Communities: The City and the Human Ecology* (New York, 1976), 6.

Following in the footsteps of Ibn Khaldun, Lewis Mumford,[4] and others, I deem the city to be a vibrant, ever-changing cultural entity. This understanding enables us to view the city as a "work in progress," rather than a fixed and inert unit. The urban stage has invariably been where socioreligious norms and imperatives, political structures, and ideals are inscribed onto the landscape and transformed into a concrete built environment. The city landscape – the built environment writ large – is a repository of unflagging human enterprise that is shaped by various cultural perspectives, be they harmonious or at odds with each other. The city, as well as the urban form, never rests and is never complete.[5] What is more, the city constitutes both a text and context for scrutinizing urban history and the concepts of urbanism.

Given the scarcity of pertinent sources on its urban topography, the existing landscapes are especially crucial to the research on the provincial Mamluk cities of *al-Shām*.[6] In addition to the traditional texts, reading the city in its cultural context[7] entails "mandatory sources," such as archaeological-cum-architectural sites such as the city landscape, monuments, institutions, and private houses, and the perceptions of the city's manifold "users," both past and present.

The city is the product of multifarious cultural understandings. In other words, its elaborate landscape bears the imprint of multiple cultures. Accordingly, I have chosen to use the plural form of culture for several reasons: to stress the various ideologies and perceptions that coexist in any city; to signify the continuous struggle between different players over which ideas, ideologies, and urban conceptions will define the city; to highlight the heterogeneity of cities; and to emphasize the fact that the city is a socially constructed space. My examination of Mamluk cities is premised on a theoretical awareness of the ways in which disparate factors (social, cultural, and political forces; citizens; past urban developments; contemporary readers of chronicles; and travelers) have built and shaped the city. Moreover, this study draws heavily on several modern fields of

[4] See L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938).
[5] S. Kostof, *The City Shaped. Urban Patterns and Meaning through History* (Boston, London, Toronto, 1991), 9.
[6] R. S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton NJ, 1991), 248.
[7] The geographers J. Agnew, J. Mercer, and D. Sopher were the first to elaborate on this idea as part of their effort to restore a more humanized and less quantified approach to geography; idem (eds.), *The City in Cultural Context* (Boston, London, Sydney, 1984). For a similar approach, also see D. Chevallier et al., *L'Espace social de la ville arabe* (Paris, 1979).

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research: historical, cultural, and urban geography; the history of the
Middle East; Islamic art history and architecture; archaeology; and cul-
tural studies. At the crossroads of all these disciplines lies the study of
historic cultural landscapes. In my estimation, the research of the city must
encompass the historical production of urban space; namely, human pat-
terns that alter the contours of the natural environment.

   This book thus constitutes an attempt to view the cities of the historical
Middle East through the medium of the urban landscape. By casting the
city as my primary research object, I hope to overcome some of the barriers
and lacunae that inform the field of urban history in all that concerns pre-
sixteenth-century Middle Eastern cities. Another problematic aspect of
urban studies of the Middle East and the Islamic world in general is the
continuing efforts to construct a theory of the city or urbanism that is
endemic to Islam, namely "the Islamic city."

   That said, contemporary urban scholars of the Middle East are attempt-
ing to debunk the notion of "the Islamic city." For instance, Janet Abu
Lughod's influential paper suggests that few urban attributes span the
entire Muslim world.[8] My overarching claim is that to extricate the field
of urban studies from the theoretical bias and misconceptions that marred
early research on the lands of Islam, we need to view the Mamluk city, inter
alia, from a broader theoretical standpoint. More specifically, cities need
to be studied on a regional and historical scale that dovetails smoothly
with general theories of the city and urbanism the world over. Or, as
green activists put it, scholars must "think globally" and "act locally."
Alternating between different geographical scales – local, regional, global –
promises to liberate the field from the efforts to construct a theory of
Islamic urbanism.[9] Throughout this book, I contend that scholars can
improve their access to and attain a better understanding of cities and
their societies if they are included within the wide-ranging trends and
theoretical debates that pertain to historical and contemporary urban
studies because the focus on the role of Islam in urbanism or the urbanism
of Islam have, by and large, yielded notions of across-the-board unity that
never existed in the Muslim world.

[8] J. Abu Lughod, "The Islamic City – Historic Myth, Islamic Essence, and Contemporary
   Relevance," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19 (1987): 155–176.
[9] This idea was already put forward by Anthony King, "Culture, Space, and Representation:
   Problems of Methodology in Urban Studies (revised edition)," in *Urbanism in Islam. The
   Proceedings of the International Conference on Urbanism in Islam (ICUIT)*, Supplement
   (Tokyo, 1989), 368.

In sum, the present book offers a critical reading of built urban environments that undertakes to analyze the history of cities, rather than the histories that took place in cities. Consequently, the urban sphere constitutes the focus of this work and is not a mere backdrop.[10]

STUDYING THE CITY IN CULTURAL CONTEXT: CONTEXTUALIZING CULTURE AND LANDSCAPE

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the overwhelmingly dominant outlook in the field of urban studies was the quantitative (and technical) approach whereby cities operate solely on the basis of rational economic incentives of profit and loss, both on the individual and group level. In response to this growing trend, Agnew, Mercer, and Sopher suggest that the city should be examined "in cultural context":

The study of the city in cultural context implies two things. First, network of practices and ideas exist that are drawn from the shared experiences and histories of social groups. Secondly, these practices and ideas can be invoked to account for specific patterns of urban growth and urban form.[11]

Put differently, the city should be understood and explored as a cultural product and process. This sort of study may be conducted via the urban form – the city's built environment. In contrast to the quantitative and allegedly rationalistic approach to urban studies, Agnew, Mercer, and Sopher insist that culture counts! In so doing, they assume that culture has measurable, or at least visible, effects on the landscape. With this in mind, let us attempt to define culture.

The concept of culture is notoriously difficult to pin down.[12] Indeed, the scholarly discourse on this rather commonplace term bears witness to the problems that both using and attempting to define it entail. Needless to say, the concept abounds in various academic fields (e.g., anthropology, sociology, economy, history, and the arts),[13] the media and, not least, everyday life. Nevertheless, one would be hard pressed to find a straightforward or consensual definition for this quotidian concept.

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[10] This idea was inspired by Summerson's insightful definition of urban history as "the history of the fabrics of cities"; see, J. Summerson, "Urban Forms," in O. Handlin and J. Burchard (eds.), *The Historian and the City* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1963), 165.
[11] Agnew, Mercer, and Sopher, *The City in Cultural Context*, 1.
[12] Z. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London, 1973).
[13] For example, see the discussion on the connections between economy and culture in R. J. Holton, *Economy and Society* (London, New York, 1992).

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The Latin term *culture* has several meanings: cultivation,[14] study, education, and even liturgy.[15] Over the years, culture came to be understood as the sum total of the social behaviors, norms, and institutions that characterize a social group. Within this context, culture was perceived as a *genre de vie*, especially by anthropologists exploring tribal groups around the world. The definition here was formulated by Edward B. Tylor, one of the founding fathers of anthropology:

Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.[16]

Despite being coined in 1871, Tylor's definition is still in vogue among anthropologists. It is not appreciably different from a more recent definition that appeared in a distinguished journal:

Culture is the values, belief, behaviour, and material objects that, together, form a people's way of life. Culture includes what we think, how we act, and what we own. Culture is both a bridge to our past and a guide to the future.[17]

According to this school of thought, a group's culture is the sum total of mutual understandings that are acquired through acculturation (education, informal ties, etc.).

At one and the same time, culture is also a human mechanism that enables groups to function in different, occasionally hostile, environments. In addition, it serves as the basis for a shared social life.[18] Following this same logic, Braudel argues that culture naturally consists of a moral-cum-spiritual dimension, on the one hand, and a materialistic, even trivial dimension, on the other.[19] Since the mundane aspect is manifest in the built environment, the urban landscape must also be understood as a product of the culture in which it was forged.

In light of these definitions, we may conclude that the sharing of cultural traits engenders a close enough view of the world for designing a residential space in concert. Put differently, people transform and create an

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[14] The word indeed turns up in the context of agriculture.
[15] E. Kahler, "Culture and Evolution," in M. F. Ashley Montagu (ed.), *Culture: Man's Adaptive Dimension* (New York, 1968), 3–4.
[16] E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Research into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom* (New York, [1871] 1974), 1.
[17] W. Soyinka, "Africa's Culture Producers," *Society* 28/2 (January-February 1991), 32.
[18] M. J. Swartz and D. K. Jordan (eds.), *Culture – the Anthropological Perspective* (New York, 1980).
[19] F. Braudel, *A History of Civilization* (tr. R. Mayne) (London, 1994), 3–8.

expanse – a landscape – by implementing a set of norms, ideas, and laws
that derive from a particular culture. Culture thus impacts human activity
not only by defining noble ideals, but also by serving as a mechanism that
shapes and regulates an array of habits, capacities, and styles from which
people choose what they believe to be the most appropriate techniques,
construction methods, and aesthetic values for their environment. This is
precisely what anthropologist Ann Swidler is referring to when she equates
culture with a handy toolkit.[20]

Thus far, I have sought to establish what culture is and how it
affects the landscape. That said, the countless definitions offered by
scholars from manifold disciplines attest to the difficulty of articulat-
ing the exact nature of culture, as it simultaneously refers to both an
ideology (and its attendant social codes) that influences the cultural
process and the products of that same culture (writing, music, archi-
tecture, rituals, ceremonies, language, etc.). So, in a sense, culture is
omniscient because it is the reason, the process, and the outcome all in
one. Because of this definition's ample elasticity and expansiveness,
instead of clarifying matters, it obfuscates and distances the concept of
culture to the point of futility.

The tendency to reify culture is the primary reason behind the problem-
atic, certainly inconsistent and insufficient definitions of this key concept.
In recognition of this theoretical lacuna, cultural geographers have sought
to devise various alternatives. For example, Don Mitchell avers that
"there's no such thing as culture."[21] He demonstrates that whenever
culture is perceived as an ontological entity, object, or sphere, its definition
tends to be fuzzy and redundant. In his estimation, culture is an idea rooted
in particular systems of reproduction: architecture, music, art, education,
etc.[22] Following theorists like Antonio Grmasci and Bruno Latour,
Mitchell contends that, so long as we keep searching for the ontological
roots of culture, we will be less inclined to raise other, more important
culture-related issues, such as: who defines culture? How does it affect our
lives? What are the power structures that undergird the idea of culture?
Who are the social agents that promote and ultimately benefit from certain
perceptions of culture? Put differently, Mitchell places an emphasis on

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[20] A. Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociology Review* 51
(April 1986): 273–286.
[21] Mitchell, "There's No Such Thing as Culture," 102–116. Also see idem, *Cultural
Geography – A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, Malden MA, 2000).
[22] Ibid., 110.

what is often referred to as "the cultural industry."[23] His position also infers that culture, or what is perceived as culture, is the result of relationships and power struggles between players in society. These relationships are often so entrenched in the social fabric that they are no longer questioned and are assumed to be natural, rather than socially constructed norms, perceptions, and ideals. In consequence, culture should be understood, first and foremost, as a framework for concealing the power structure and struggles that are responsible for the fact that a particular social code or moral behavior is deemed to fall under the rubric of culture. Put succinctly, we need to rid ourselves of what Gupta and Ferguson called "the fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces."[24]

Culture is an ever-changing concept. Therefore, it is but a temporary representation of a given society's norms and ideals. Once the conflicts and struggles over these norms have been settled, they are considered the cultural pillars of that society. However, these norms are constantly in flux or under pressure to be altered. In consequence, the spatial outcomes of these ideals are also inherently transient because they are the ramifications of the social and political changes within any society.

According to this perspective, the study of the city in a cultural context need not be understood as researching culture through the mediation of the city, but rather a theoretical awareness of the dynamic quality of culture and, above all, its political implications. Therefore, it is imperative to realize that the very classification or omission of a phenomenon under the heading of culture constitutes a political act, which is usually the sole prerogative of those in power. For example, the Romans deemed outsiders to be acultural (barbaric), whereas Mamluk dignitaries shaped the urban milieu as they saw fit, in accordance with their political needs, religious norms, and aesthetic tastes. By grasping culture as an idea, rather than an entity, the study of cities may well avoid the fixation for arriving at a clear-cut, complete, and overly rigorous definition of what constitutes a city in the Islamic world. Moreover, we are less likely to view the city as frozen in time. Instead, it offers the possibility of dynamic means for examining cities of yesteryear and their societies and appreciating that they were and remain vibrant entities in a constant state of flux.

[23] The concept of "cultural industry" is the hallmark of the Frankfurt School; for example, see T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London, New York, 2001).

[24] A. Gupta, J. Ferguson, "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7/1(1992): 6–23.

That said, to study the city in cultural context may well be an inspiring idea, but it is simply too vague, and the reader might infer or aspire to topics that are not part of the present scope of the book. Culture is an abstraction too big to work with methodologically. Using culture as a blanket term may suggest a hoard of issues and subject matters to be explored. Surely, the specificities of urban administration, the role of women in cities, philanthropy, the city and the legal system, family networks, education, the economic structure of the city and professional guilds, urban demography, and many more topics are all important and may well be addressed in their cultural context within cities. Therefore, it seems essential at this juncture to address more directly the way that I navigate between the above understanding of culture and the exploration into Syrian cities during the Mamluk period. The mediating term and context for the study of cities is by and large, *landscape*. This term is used by various disciplines, but, in what follows, I will contextualize it from a historical and cultural geographical point of view.

Landscape is surely one of the more vexing and therefore fascinating human creations. It is anything but self-explanatory, simple, or innocent. Certainly, it is not a neutral arena in which social relations matter of factly or accidently unfold. Landscape, as the argument goes, is not simply out there to be studied as a natural phenomenon. It is certainly not "nature."[25] In this context, landscape is "culture" before it is "nature."[26] The very word "landscape" in its cultural meaning entails the existence and work of human agents.[27] Hence, landscapes simply do not exist without human agents. Landscape is society's unwitting biography in which and through which ideas, codes of practice, religious norms, and cultural standards take physical form. Therefore, landscape consists of physical phenomena but is not confined to the physical manifestations of objects. This is, perhaps, the most comprehensive medium through which societies and individuals have expressed their uniqueness, aspirations, and status, among many other sociopolitical needs. Therefore, landscape is essentially a cultural praxis; it is the outcome of a society's ideals, images, and, at times, code of practice in a given time and particular geography. As such, cultural landscape is a

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[25] Y. Tuan, "Thought and Landscape," in D. Meinig (ed.), *Interpretations of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographic Essays* (New York, 1979), 89–102.

[26] S. Simon, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, 1995), 5.

[27] K. Olwig, "Sexual Cosmology: Nation and Landscape at the Conceptual Interstices of Nature and Culture, or: What does Landscape Really Mean?" B. Bender (ed.), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford, 1993), 307–308.

highly politicized construction, sphere, or process.[28] And (to state the obvious) it is certainly the product of human labor!

However, if this is indeed the case, then Mitchell is right to suggest that it is also about the work that landscape does; namely, to mystify human labor and make it (i.e., the landscape itself) appear natural, rather than the product of social-cultural-political forces.[29] It should be seen as a cultural medium that has a dual role: "It naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable."[30] Hence, landscape is a beguiling phenomenon: although manmade and perceived as a natural outcome of human labor, it is anything but natural. The formation of landscape is inexorably linked to politics, power structures, and surely struggles over meanings and ownership. The creation or rather the construction of landscape is all about power and thus entails disputes and the use of force. Therefore, the construction of landscape is a continuous dialogue and, indeed, struggle between different forces. Along the way, power is used, implemented, and contested because there are no power relations without resistance.[31]

The use of power in the construction of landscape is unavoidably linked with ideology or, put simply, the way people want to represent themselves.[32] Landscapes are ideological also because they can be used to endorse, legitimize, and/or challenge social and political control.[33] Thus, landscapes carry signs and symbols that represent social norms, identity, memory, cultural codes, and the ways these were, and still are, fought and debated among different forces. It is indeed a text and hence susceptible as any other to many readings.[34] Landscape is one of the most complex and intriguing signifying systems, saturated with signs, symbols, and

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[28] See for example, D. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (London, 1984). J. Duncan, *The City as Text: The Politics of Landscape Interpretation in the Kandyan Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1990).

[29] Mitchell, *Cultural Geography*, 104.

[30] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* (Chicago and London, 1994), 15.

[31] M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (ed. C. Gordon) (London, 1980).

[32] H. Baker and G. Bigger (eds.), *Ideology and Landscape in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1992), 1–12.

[33] L. Kong, "Ideological Hegemony and the Political Symbolism of Religious Buildings in Singapore," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11 (1993): 25.

[34] The literature is abundant on this issue. See for example, D. Meinig (ed.), *Interpretations of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographic Essays* (New York, 1979); Duncan, *City as Text*; T. Barnes and J. Duncan, "Introduction: Writing Worlds" in T. Barnes and J. Duncan (eds.), *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text and Metaphor in the representation of Landscape* (London, 1992), 1–17.