This paper attempts to explore and document the persistence of a classical urban fabric in the city of Aleppo in Syria. I'm presenting a research in progress on the urban fabric of a city, which I consider a good example of Mediterranean city. The results of this research are still partials, but they could represent, however, a starting point for a wider investigation.

Persistence of classical urban fabrics in the Mediterranean basin

The theoretical basis of this research is the widespread presence of urban fabrics deriving from *domus* agglomerations throughout the Mediterranean basin. The persistence of their basic characteristics, however, may be verified in only a few of the areas to which they were imported.

As is well known, the Mediterranean basin is the original territorial organism of western culture. Even though there has been a constant diffusion and exchange of civil, social and architectural models throughout the Mediterranean, we usually associate the first great moment of programmed 'cultural' unification with the advent of the Roman Empire.

The reorganisation of the Empire was the first and, perhaps, only operation on a vast territorial scale which used exact methods in planning road networks, territorial division and urban organisation.

This programme had two different outcomes. On the one hand, the appearance of the conquered territories was altered by their division into centuries and by the foundation of new cities; on the other, their appearance was rendered homogeneous and in the colonised areas new, common cultural models were imposed.

Thus, throughout the Mediterranean basin, the same typology of city and dwelling came to be widespread and was adapted to a variety of pre-existing conditions.

In some areas of the Mediterranean, the earlier conditions (building type and urban structure) were similar to Roman types and the cities which arose there have better conserved their original urban and housing structures. In the south-eastern regions of the Mediterranean, for example, the *domus* type dwelling has kept its main characteristics even up to the present day. This is an important point, since in many Roman cities one may easily verify the persistence of an original town plan, whereas the *domus* type dwelling has often lost the main...
features of its original structure and has undergone a process of transformation (fragmentation, encroachment, etc.) which varies greatly from region to region.

In the south-eastern regions of the Mediterranean, the hypothesis of the persistence of the classical town plan is confirmed by the fact that the advent of Islam did not represent a rupture with the past, as one might at first suppose. When they didn’t founded new cities, the Islamic people used pre-existing urban patterns without major alterations, thereby adapting the Roman-Hellenistic building type and urban layout. In contrast with many cities in Italy, France or Spain, which faced a long period of stagnation in the Middle Age, in the south-eastern regions of the Mediterranean many cities have been continuously growing from their foundation until present time.

Persistence of classical urban fabric in the old city of Aleppo

The city of Aleppo, as with other cities in Syria (for example, Damascus and Laodicea), is a Seleucid foundation, built according to rather strict planning regulations and with a layout common to many other Greek cities in the Mediterranean. After its foundation, it remained under the control of classical civilisations (Hellenistic and Roman) for about six hundred years. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that traces of the original plan of the Greek and Roman town are legible and that the old town within the original quadrilateral configuration has kept its basic structure, even though, on a smaller scale, the urban fabric has been transformed in a way which is typical of the Islamic city. Ever since the first maps were compiled by the French land registry in the early thirties of the last century the persistence of the Greek town plan has been evident to all; yet, even though Aleppo has often been the object of scholarship, no one has ever been particularly interested in the Roman town plan, which has perhaps been considered merely a brief episode, a simple adaptation of the Greek city layout.

The persistence of the Roman urban fabric, however, goes much deeper and is more widespread than may at first seem. Yet this fabric is not easily legible, since it was derived from territorial planning which took place in different stages and which was strictly dependent on orographic conditions. Thus, as in many other cases, it was not characterised by a single, rigid plan as in Greek cities, but by a process of addition and superimposition.

Urban studies are part of historical studies but deal with the town itself that is real and still standing and holds traces of its past. Only through a careful reading of the urban fabric, therefore, is it possible to reconstruct step by step all the phases of the city’s urban history.

The reading

From a reading of the alignments of building layout and an examination of the historical data provided by scholarship we may conclude that the Greek city (called Beroea) was characterised by a structure common to all other Seleucid colonies, as Jean Sauvaget has first shown in his article “Le plan de Laodicée-sur-mer” and in his book “Alep. Essai sur le développement d’une grande ville syrienne des origines au milieu du XIXe siècle.”

The antique fortified city lay to the east of the acropolis. The via recta connected the acropolis to the retaining wall and passed nearby the tell (primitive settlement). The agora and courtyard houses in 46 x 124 metre blocks were situated along this road. Despite a wide process of transformation of courtyard houses in specialized buildings still now one can detect the customary regularity of
TRACES OF THE FIRST ORIGINAL PLANNING PHASE OF THE GREEK TOWN

ORTHOGONAL ALIGNMENTS OF THE GREEK PLANNING PHASE
RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STREETS PLANNED IN GREEK PERIOD
ORTHOGONAL ALIGNMENTS OF THE
FIRST ROMAN PLANNING PHASE

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FIRST
ROMAN PLANNING PHASE
ORTHOGONAL ALIGNMENTS OF THE SECOND ROMAN PLANNING PHASE

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SECOND ROMAN PLANNING PHASE
ORTHOGONAL ALIGNMENTS OF THE THIRD ROMAN PLANNING PHASE

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE THIRD ROMAN PLANNING PHASE

TRACES OF THE THIRD ROMAN PLANNING PHASE
the original Hellenistic planning along this road. This initial plan was followed by a spontaneous growth of the urban fabric up to the retaining wall which probably encircled the city. The existence and position of this wall are not documented, but its traces are indicated by the presence of impromptu paths near the ancient city gates and by anomalies in the urban fabric. The first Roman town plan of Aleppo was a continuation of the Greek and probably consisted simply of an adaptation of the earlier urban layout to meet the needs of the new inhabitants. Traces of this plan are legible in the widening of one or perhaps two blocks to the east of the agora (from 46 to 71 metres that correspond to the widening of a heredium - dimension of the agrarian roman planning system) and in the presence of domus agglomerations laid out in a north-south direction scattered around the periphery of the Greek city. The eastern boundary, beyond which the city did not expand in this initial phase, was probably created naturally by a branch of the river Kouek which now encircles it, as shown by contour lines between the agora and the citadel. This initial Roman town plan was followed by two more. The first notable hiatus in urban growth took place in the second Roman planning phase which, like the third, was based on territorial rather than urban concepts of planning and therefore followed a different course from the first: these later phases show a lack of continuity with the pre-existing urban fabric, rotating by 18° (probably corresponding to an ancient pre-classical settlement?) and 10° (corresponding to the axis of the valley along the river Kouek) respectively with regard to the initial north-south orientation.

In our attempt to reconstruct the Roman street pattern we can trace on cadastral map a scheme of correspondences between Roman insulae and the urban tissue. In this way it is also possible to find, to the east of the agora, the starting point for Roman agrarian planning of the area. In the framework of the pacified Roman Empire, indeed, the pattern of Roman centuries spreads out from the city to the territory and lays onto the landscape its regular and rational structure.

A reading on a scale of 1 to 50,000 and 1 to 25,000 shows the presence of centuries at a territorial level. Similar Roman centuries have been found also in the areas around both Damascus and Homs as shown by M. Dodinet, J. Leblanc, J.-P. Vallat, F. Villeneuve in their article on the ancient Syrian landscape. After Roman time the Byzantine and Mamluk cities were overlaid onto the classical city, disrupting the Roman urban fabric and encroach on the remaining free space within the new smaller retaining wall built after the end of the pax romana and leaving out from the walled city a big part of the too wide and discontinuous urban area.

Co-presence of the classical/occidental with Islamic/oriental city

On the basis of this first reading on an urban scale of the building agglomerations, Aleppo cannot properly be defined as Islamic in its original quadrilateral configuration; rather it represents the co-presence of the classical/occidental with Islamic/oriental city. In fact, through the reconstruction of the alignments of the walls of the buildings, the reading of the urban fabric reveals that Aleppo in its original quadrilateral configuration was entirely planned in the classical period. In the course of time, an Islamic scheme was superimposed on the classical one, and the city today is the result of this superimposition. Thus a cul-de-sac system disrupted the ancient geometrical street pattern in order to allow access to the courtyard houses, which were created through a division of and encroachment on the
older domus and courtyard houses lots. The cul-de-sac system is not, however, peculiar to Islamic urban fabric; rather it is typical of the encroachment of courtyard houses into pre-existing buildings and is found, for example, in many cities based on a domus agglomeration. This system derives from the division of the single lots of the ancient houses into several courtyard houses and allows us to invert the common European notion of the 'extrovert' or outward-facing block.

Through an analysis of the blocks of the original quadrilateral configuration of the city, especially those belonging to the Roman planned urban fabrics, which are larger than the Greek, while the number of specialised buildings is smaller, we may see that this type of system was very frequent. In those blocks the majority of the houses are only accessible from the cul-de-sacs. Consequently the entire urban fabric is self-enclosed and is based on a relation of solid/void in which the void is 1/3 of the solid. In the original quadrilateral part of the city, indeed, fragments of the open space are just like shapes on the built background of the city, and the void itself is actually not the background on which the urban agglomeration lays.

The resulting notion of an urban fabric and building agglomeration seems to be that of the classical city taken to the extreme, characterised by only a few specialised buildings, against which is set the uniform mass of undifferentiated courtyard houses.

The research

Through this reading of the building agglomerations it has been possible to reconstruct the phases of the original layout of the urban fabric of courtyard houses in Aleppo. Here I have dealt only with results based on the reading of the urban fabric and I have tried to underline the aspects relevant to a continuity between the classical and Islamic city. I worked on French cadastral maps of the early thirties because in only these maps is it possible to find the evidence of the evolution of the city before modern times when the urban fabric in the old city was completely disrupting. But the aim of my research is not an historical one of presenting a model which has remained unchanged, but of following the various stages or phases of a process which has led to the present layout of courtyard houses and which has brought about those modifications that have adapted them to the needs of contemporary life. In other words, the aim of the research I'm carrying on is based on the search for characteristics typical of the Mediterranean city. In the light of this research, it would be interesting in next steps to try and reconstruct the typological process of domus agglomerations in Aleppo in that the process here is similar to, though more extreme than, that which has taken place in other Italian and Mediterranean cities with the same basic domus layout. Moreover, in Aleppo the courtyard typology persisted up to the fifties of last centuries, reaching high density levels and representing a valid alternative model to modern housing. Thus, the hypothesis of a cultural continuity between different geographical areas throughout the Mediterranean allows us to understand the structure of our cities and houses, through an analysis of examples which, only apparently, seem far removed from our own culture. According with the idea that typological studies are a preliminary instrument to the activity of design my research on the characters of the Mediterranean city is an attempt to find in these building types and urban fabrics competitive elements with the ever strongest request of high density levels and housing standards for the nowadays city.

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References notes

1. This article is part of a Doctor's degree thesis I'm carrying on at the Polytechnic of Bari - School of Architecture, Italy: "Role of courtyard house in making Mediterranean forma urbis. The example of Aleppo", under the tutelage of Prof. Claudio D'Amato and Attilio Petruccioli.

2. An abstract of this work was first presented at the ISUF Conference in Cincinnati - Ohio, USA, September 2001.

3. The best known example of this kind of Roman territory planning is the city of Rome, Italy.


7. This is why the Roman agrarian planning system is adopted in these drawings for the roman planning phases, according with the roman rule "iter populo debitum" (meaning ‘public right of way is indebted’) which usually governed rural areas: the roads were not measured separately from the fields but encroached on the field measurement.
