

## Topic Page: [Damascus](#)

Definition: **Damascus** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Capital of Syria, on the River Barada, SW Syria. Thought to be the oldest continuously occupied city in the world, in ancient times it belonged to the Egyptians, Persians and Greeks, and under Roman rule was a prosperous commercial centre. It was held by the Ottoman Turks for 400 years, and after World War 1 came under French administration. It became capital of an independent Syria in 1941. Sites include the Great Mosque and the Citadel. It is Syria's administrative and financial centre. Industries: damask fabric, metalware, leather goods, refined sugar. Pop. (2005) 2,317,000.

Summary Article: **Damascus**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(dəməs'kəʃ), Arabic *Dimashq* or *ash-Sham*, city (1995 est. pop. 1,500,000), capital of Syria and of its Damascus governorate, SW Syria, on the eastern edge of the Anti-Lebanon Mts. It is Syria's largest city and its administrative, financial, and communications center. Damascus stands in the oasis of Ghouta on the margins of the Syrian Desert, and is bisected by the Barada River. Manufactures include textiles, metalware, refined sugar, glass, furniture, cement, leather goods, preserves, confections, and matches. The city is served by a railroad, highways, and an international airport.

### Points of Interest

Damascus Univ. (1923), Damascus Oriental Institute of Music (1950), a technological institute (1963), an industrial school (1964), and the national museum (1919) are in Damascus. The old city lies south of the Barada, and the new town (greatly extended since 1926) lies north of the river. Points of interest include the Great Mosque (one of the largest and most famous mosques in the Muslim world), the quadrangular citadel (originally Roman; rebuilt 1219), a 16th-century Muslim monastery, and Azm palace (1749; now a museum and center for the study of Islamic art and architecture). The biblical "street which is called Straight" still runs in the old city from the east to the west gate, flanked by bazaars.

### History

Located in a strategic gap commanding the Barada River and transdesert routes, Damascus has been inhabited since prehistoric times and is reputedly the oldest continuously occupied city in the world. There was a city on its site even before the time (c.2000 B.C.) of Abraham. Damascus was probably held by the Egyptians before the Hittite period (2d millennium B.C.) and was later ruled by the Israelites and Aram. Tiglathpileser III made it (732 B.C.) a part of the Assyrian Empire. From the 6th to the 4th cent. B.C. it was a provincial capital of the Persian Empire until it passed (332 B.C.) without a struggle to the armies of Alexander the Great.

After Alexander's death the Seleucids (see Seleucia) gained control of the city, although the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt tried to wrest it from them. When Seleucid power waned, Tigranes of Armenia took Damascus; but after his surrender to the Romans, Damascus passed (64 B.C.) into the Roman Empire under Pompey. One of the cities of the Decapolis confederacy, it was generally under Roman influence until the breakup of the empire.

Damascus became a thriving commercial city, noted for its woolen cloth and grain, and was early converted to Christianity. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul (d. 67) experienced his dramatic

conversion, and it was from Damascus that he escaped persecution by being lowered down the wall in a basket. The Roman emperor Theodosius I had a Christian church built there (A.D. 379) on the foundations of the Roman temple of Zeus (1st cent. A.D.).

After the permanent split (395) of the Roman Empire, Damascus became a provincial capital of the Byzantine Empire. The Arabs, who had attacked and sporadically held the city since before the time of Paul, occupied it permanently in 635. The city was then gradually converted to Islam, and the Christian church built by Theodosius was rebuilt (705) as the Great Mosque. Damascus was the seat of the caliphate under the Umayyads from 661 until 750, when the Abbasids made Baghdad the center of the Muslim world. Damascus thereafter fell prey to new conquerors—the Egyptians, the Karmathians, and the Seljuk Turks (1076).

Although the Christian Crusaders failed in several attempts to annex the city, they ravaged the rich alluvial plain several times while the Saracen rulers, notably Nur ad-Din (1118–74) and Saladin (1137?–1193), were absent on campaigns. Damascus continued to prosper under the Saracens; its bazaars sold brocades (damask), wool, furniture inlaid with mother of pearl, and the famous swords and other ware of the Damascene metalsmiths. In 1260 the city fell to the Mongols under Hulagu Khan, and it was sacked c.1400 by Timur, who took away the swordmakers and armorers.

In 1516, Damascus passed to the Ottoman Turks, and for 400 years it remained in the Ottoman Empire. There was a massacre of Christians by Muslims in 1860, and in 1893 a disastrous fire damaged the Great Mosque. In World War I, Col. T. E. Lawrence helped to prepare the British capture of Damascus; it was entered (1918) by British Field Marshal Allenby and Emir Faisal (later King Faisal I of Iraq).

Britain had promised that Arab lands would revert back to the Arabs if the Turks were defeated. However, once in Damascus, the British reneged on the promise. After the war the city became the capital of one of the French Levant States mandated under the League of Nations. Owing to broken promises about Arab control, Damascus in 1925–26 joined with the Druze in revolt against the French, who shelled and badly damaged the city.

During World War II, Free French and British forces entered Damascus, which became capital of independent Syria in 1941. When Syria and Egypt joined to form the United Arab Republic in 1958, Cairo was made the capital, with Damascus the capital of the Syrian region. Syria withdrew from the United Arab Republic in 1961. In the Syrian civil war that began in 2011 there was significant fighting in the city's suburbs, but Damascus itself remained largely under control of government forces.

## **Bibliography**

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