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The Construction of an Islamic City in Palestine.

*The Case of Umayyad al-Ramla**

NIMROD LUZ

At the beginning of the eighth century A.D. a new town was built in Palestine, called al-Ramla (Ramlah of today). It was founded by the then provincial governor, Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik (d. 717) in order to serve as the capital of Jund Filasṭīn, the southern province of Palestine. The building of a new town, and especially of a capital city, constituted a significant departure in the Palestine environment, for two main reasons. First, it was the first city to be founded after a period of 350 years, i.e., for most of the Byzantine epoch. Second, though the Muslims ruled the country for 1100 years, al-Ramla remained the sole example of a new town in the whole of Palestine. The al-Ramla enterprise raises quite a number of questions, among them: why did the Muslims bother to build a new town in this district; what were the considerations leading to the choice of this size for the provincial capital; was the enterprise planned following a model, or haphazardly; did the town present salient Muslim characteristics? Can we speak at all of Muslim urban traits in relation to al-Ramla; what was its population, what were the inhabitants' occupations; did Sulaymān make a special contribution to the al-Ramla project, if at all? In this paper, I intend to touch on these questions, not necessarily in that order, mainly to understand al-Ramla itself but also in the wider context of urbanization at the beginning of the Muslim era.

Historical background

Not unexpectedly, the Muslim conquest brought about changes in the area of Palestine. One of the first acts attributed to the Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (ruled 634–44) was the administrative reorganization of the overall Syrian region (al-Shām) into four provinces (*anjād*). The change was promulgated at al-Jābiyya on the Golan Heights, after the battle of Yarmūk, apparently in A.D. 638.¹ At the beginning four provinces were created: Ḥimṣ, Dimashq, al-Urdunn and Filasṭīn. Thus Palestine was divided into the two last named, the former in the north, the latter in the south. In the days of the Umayyad caliphs (660–750),

* This article is based upon sections of my M.A. Thesis submitted to the Hebrew University, under the supervision of Dr R. Rubin and Dr A. Elad, to whom I would like to express my gratitude. I also gratefully acknowledge Ms T. Sofer's devoted assistance with the drawings following this paper and Dr R. Amitai-Preiss for his comments regarding the English version of this paper. I wish to dedicate this paper to the memory of my beloved father.

¹ M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A.D. 600–750 (A.H. 132)*, *A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 41. He places it at A.H. 17/A.D. 38. See also P. M. Holt *et al.* (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, i, p. 62 for a slightly different date, A.H. 636.

Palestine enjoyed relative prosperity, certainly compared with succeeding Muslim periods. The Umayyad dynasty, from their seat in Damascus, invested ample resources in the development of the Palestine provinces, as shown by their extensive works in Jerusalem. At the same time, Arabic became the language of government and Arab–Muslim administrative principles took root.² This prosperity throughout al-Shām was terminated with the ascendancy of the ‘Abbāsids, who transferred the political centre eastwards, to what is now Iraq.³ Al-Ramla was built during the apogee of the Umayyad dynasty; therefore we must also examine its foundation in the general context of regional development and administrative organization.⁴

A real urban innovation?

Many Muslim sources describe the original foundation of al-Ramla by Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik.⁵ As against these, a number of historical sources and modern research attest to its existence even before Sulaymān.⁶ Among others, Mujīr al-Dīn (d. 1521) categorically states that al-Ramla served as the capital of the kings of Judaea.⁷ Mentions of al-Ramla in a number of Muslim sources, as an important town in Palestine even before Sulaymān’s days (and especially in Byzantine times), would contradict the assumption that the city constituted an Umayyad urban innovation. However, a more exact examination of such sources reveals a mistake in the identification of the place: it appears that in general Lod is meant.

A thorough examination of the copious Byzantine sources, as well as of the research on the subject of population centres in Palestine at that time, failed to disclose the existence of a town named al-Ramla hard by the municipal limits of Lod.⁸ The number and variety of sources severely limit the possibility that such a site might be overlooked. Thus it is quite safe to assume that the absence in Byzantine sources of any mention of such a town indicates that it really did not then exist. Another argument is that from purely geographical considerations it would be hard to accept the existence, in Byzantine times, of another town so close to Lod. This was a central and important city, so that the existence of another town would pose serious geographical–economical problems. A town needs free space for

² G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam* (Beckenham, 1987), pp. 1–11.

³ B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (London, 1977), p. 83.

⁴ Sourdél was the first to analyze the inception of al-Ramla as part of a comprehensive Umayyad administrative policy, D. Sourdél, “La fondation Umayyade d’al-Ramla en Palestine”, in H. R. Romer and A. Noth (eds.), *Studien zur Geschichte und kultur des Vorderen Orients* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 387–95.

⁵ Aḥmad b. Yahyā al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden, 1866), p. 143; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad ibn al-Faqīh al-Ḥamadhanī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden, 1885), p. 102. But see also, ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Khuradadhbīh, *Kitāb al-masālik w-al-Mamālik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden, 1889), p. 79 where he ascribes this description to Jerusalem. See also a parallel copy, Yāqūt b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muḥjam Buldan*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, ii (Leipzig, 1866), p. 818. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Kitāb al-Tanbih wa-l-Ashraf*, ed. M. J. De Goeje, (Leiden, 1893), p. 359; Aḥmad b. ‘Abdallāh al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Sinā‘at al-Inshā’*, iv, (Beirut, 1984), p. 99.

⁶ See for example, M. Ish Shalom, “On the settlement of Shfela and Sharon during the Middle-Ages (the inception of al-Ramla)”, in Y. Aharoni (ed.), *Excavations and Researches* (Tel-Aviv, 1973), pp. 194–203 (in Hebrew).

⁷ Mujīr al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī al-Ulaymī, *Al-Uns al-Jalīl bi-Ta’rikh al-Quds wa-l-Khalīl* (Cairo, A.H. 1283), pp. 416–17.

⁸ On the region of Lod, see F. M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine* (Paris, 1923), p. 673, and map ix; M. Avi Yona, *Historical Geography of Palestine from the End of the Babylonian Exile up to the Arab Conquest* (Jerusalem (1949), 1984), pp. 106–8 and map, p. 76 (in Hebrew); Z. Safra, *Borders and Rule in Palestine during the Period of Mishna and Talmud* (Tel-Aviv, 1980), pp. 113–15 (in Hebrew).

development and a sufficient agricultural hinterland; therefore it is rare to find towns so close to each other without an extraordinary reason. The existence of two towns in such closeness constitutes an anomaly in settlement policy. There was need of unusual conditions and a special political intervention – as obtained in the eighth century – to create this unusual situation.

An exhaustive search of the archaeological findings at al-Ramla yields practically nothing of pre-Umayyad times.⁹ Only in one salvage excavation (1967) were ceramic sherds of the Iron Age found, under a building belonging to the beginnings of the early Islamic period.¹⁰ No ceramics of the Byzantine era were discovered, and certainly no remains of buildings. In every excavation the same stratigraphic picture appears: the lowest and oldest layer of al-Ramla belongs to the eighth century.¹¹ Lower than this there is only a layer of sand (*ramal*), after which the town is named.¹² However, a caveat is in order: excavations at al-Ramla have so far been quite limited. They were essentially salvage excavations or random findings under the foundations of a later building. This clearly places some limitations on the validity of my conclusions; still, even the most extensive excavations have yielded the same stratigraphy, and, above all, nothing of Byzantine origin has been found.¹³

To sum up this point, in the light of all the documents and investigations examined, no urban entity ever existed on al-Ramla's site, i.e., before Sulaymān's enterprise. Any mention of al-Ramla in Biblical times is anachronistic, its description as the city of David can only be seen as designed to enhance its importance and not as factual and reliable. Thus we may reasonably conclude that no town occupied this site before the eighth century, and that it was really founded by the Muslims.

From Caesarea to al-Ramla – the transfer of the provincial capital

The Muslim occupation of Palestine did not bring, as far as can be seen, swift and drastic changes. The accepted historical version is that up to 'Abd al-Malik's reforms (ruled 685–705) many administrative practices, such as tax collection, continued as before.¹⁴ Only after the reforms did real changes in the government of the al-Shām provinces occur, and even those were largely based on the former ways.¹⁵ However, a number of substantive

⁹ Summation of the archaeological evidence from al-Ramla: see below in the paragraph that deals with the physical layout of al-Ramla, p. 8, fig. 2; see also notes 37–8.

¹⁰ *Archaeological News*, XXI (1967), Ministry of Education, Antiquities Division and Israel Antiquities Authority, pp. 8–9 (in Hebrew).

¹¹ See, Y. Kaplan, "Excavation at the White Mosque in al-Ramla", *'Atiqot*, II (1959), pp. 106–15; M. Rosen Ayalon and A. Eitan, "Excavation in al-Ramla", *Qadmoniot*, IV (1969), pp. 138–40 (in Hebrew); "al-Ramla's excavation – findings from the eighth century A.D.", Israel Museum cat. 66 (Jerusalem, 1969); E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1993), s.v. "al-Ramla" (M. Rosen Ayalon), pp. 1267–71.

¹² The existence of the Umayyad living stratum upon the virgin soil is noted in several places for example, Rosen-Ayalon, and Eitan, "Excavation".

¹³ This impression is based on several conversations with a number of archaeologists who excavated in al-Ramla: A. Eitan, (9.8.93). A. Shavit, (7.7.93). A. Rosenberger, (10.8.93). E. Ayalon (16.3.94) believes that part of the findings belong to the late Byzantine era, but agrees that such findings are sporadic and cannot support a belief in the existence of a town, perhaps only a smaller settlement. There is no specific finding to support this assumption.

¹⁴ M. Sharon, "Processes in destruction and nomadisation in Palestine under Islamic rule", in *idem*, (ed.) *Chapters in the History of Palestine under Islamic Rule* (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 21–3 (in Hebrew).

¹⁵ Hawting, *The First Dynasty*, pp. 61–6.

changes may be noted. One of the most visible, involving a clear geographical aspect, was the transfer of the provincial capital. Under Roman and Byzantine rule, Caesarea served as the capital.¹⁶ For those who based their predominance on mastery of the sea and required constant communications with the empire's centre, the choice of a port appears the most logical. The Muslims' entry on the scene changed all that.

Their first capital was located at 'Amwās (or Emmaus-Nicopolis). Al-Muqaddasī (985) indicates that that was the central camp of the Muslim army at the beginning of the conquest.¹⁷ He uses the term *qaṣaba* to describe the town's position. However, this term is problematic, since it may denote either a capital, a chief town, a central town or even a fortified place, not necessarily implying an administrative function.¹⁸ Al-Muqaddasī states that at that time described 'Amwās was a *qaṣaba*, but not at the time of writing. Therefore one might accept *qaṣaba* as capital or at least the primary town of the province at the time described. Nevertheless, the term should be accepted in its narrowest meaning, and we should doubt the extent of 'Amwās's position as capital, with all the administrative functions that would imply. Most probably it merely served as the camp of the Muslim army and its commanders, so that the function of 'Amwās did not extend further than the army's requirements – division of spoils and soldiers' pay.

In A.D. 639 a plague erupted throughout al-Shām. It was called Ṭā'ūn 'Amwās, i.e. the plague of 'Amwās. Apparently it was the reason for abandoning 'Amwās as the Muslim forces' cantonment in southern Palestine. What was the new location of the capital? The evidence is problematic and mostly incomplete. Modern researchers have pointed to Lod as the capital from A.D. 640.¹⁹ On the other hand, Goitein believes that Jerusalem served as the primate city (his terminology) of Filastīn.²⁰ Elad ascribes to Jerusalem the role of the political-religious centre of Filastīn, from sometime during the seventh century, until the inception of al-Ramla.²¹ In his summing-up, Elad declares that even without explicit proof it may be asserted that the Umayyads saw Jerusalem as the provincial capital.

The main problem in assigning the position of capital to Jerusalem lies in the absence of an explicit text. This lack of clarity and the disputes about where exactly the capital was located are found not only in modern research; it was already apparent in the early Muslim sources. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) relates that 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, shortly after the conquest, divided the province of Filastīn in two; Jerusalem was one of the capital towns and al-Ramla (evidently he meant Lod) was the other. In each town 'Umar installed a governor

¹⁶ On Caesarea at that period see, for example, L. I. Levine and E. Netzer, "Excavation at Caesarea Maritima, 1975, 1976, 1979 – Final Report", *Qedem XXI* (Jerusalem, 1986); K. G. Holum, R. L. Hohlfelder, R. J. Bull and A. Raban, *King Herod's Dream, Caesarea on the Sea* (New York, 1988).

¹⁷ Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taḳāsim fī Ma'rifa al-Aqālīm* (Leiden, 1906), p. 176.

¹⁸ On *qaṣaba*, see E. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 2530. For further comments on other possible explanations for this term, see, M. J. De Goeje, *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, iv, (Glossarium et Addenda et Emendanda) (Leiden, 1879), p. 326. See also al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, pp. 54–5, where he clearly defines *qaṣaba* as the capital town.

¹⁹ G. Le Strange, *Palestine Under the Moslems* (London, 1890), p. 203; M. Gil, *A History of Palestine, 634–1099*, (Translated from the Hebrew [First vol.] by E. Broido), (Cambridge, 1992), p. 105; N. Ḥamāsh, "al-Ajnād wa-Īdāratihā", in M. 'A. Al-Bakhīt (ed.), *Al-Mu'tamar al-duwālī al-rābi' li-Ta'rīkh Bilād al-Shām, Bilād al-Shām fī al-ʿAṣr al-ʿUmayyī*, i (Amman, 1989), p. 286.

²⁰ S. D. Goitein, "Jerusalem during the Arab period (638–1099)", in *idem, Palestinian Jewry in Early Islamic and Crusader Times*, ed. Y. Hacker (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 3 (in Hebrew).

²¹ A. Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship, Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 160–1.

and an army in order to enforce his fiat.²² This temporary subdivision of a province into smaller administrative units was adopted in other places (e.g. in Iraq) during the first days after the conquest.²³ It might appear – though there is no decisive proof – that this step was taken as a consequence of the plague of A.D. 639. What may be deduced from al-Ṭabarī's information is that at some time during the seventh century an administrative division took place, and the province was governed from two centres. This division ceased with the accession of Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik to the governorship. Sulaymān installed himself at Lod and from there started to build his new capital of al-Ramla.²⁴

Site and situation

Al-Ramla (grid reference 137150) is located at the south of the western coastal plain of Palestine. The district is also called the Judean coastal plain or the "Pleshet" region.²⁵ The town itself is located on a local watershed, separating the basins of the Ayalon and the Soreq streams: thus it is not exposed to their overflow.²⁶ It lies about 15 km. from the sea coast and the port of Jaffa, and about 40 km. from the central ridge (Jerusalem). The overall altitude varies from west to east, from an altitude of 90–95 m. to 70–75 m. above the sea. The Umayyad town, centred on the White Mosque, was about 80 m. above sea level. Geomorphologically, the town sits on pleistocene alluvial sands, also called the "Ḥamra" (red loam) hills.²⁷ The name al-Ramla, meaning sandy ground in Arabic, thus faithfully reflects the terrain the eighth-century founders met. A subterranean transversal fracture runs from Jerusalem through the Soreq stream and al-Ramla to Jaffa. Its seismic centre is located in the vicinity of Lod.²⁸ This situation has had destructive effects on al-Ramla, both in the Muslim era and later on. Periodical tremors have been among the central factors causing the loss of Umayyad archaeological remains.

Sources of water

Besides rains (500–600 mm. per year), al-Ramla's neighbourhood enjoys a number of permanent sources of water. The largest and most stable are the Rosh ha-'Ayin springs, 18 km. north of the city. However, they could not then supply the town, since they are lower by some 60 m. than al-Ramla's average altitude. Another concentration of springs is to be found in the Tel-Gezer-Naan district (south of al-Ramla).²⁹ Within the municipal

²² Abū Ja'far, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa-'l-Mulūk*, i, New ed. (Leiden, 1964), p. 2403.

²³ Aḥmad b. Yahyā al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashraf*, iv/1, ed. M. Schloessinger and M. J. Kister (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 211; M. G. Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 91, 142, 162–3.

²⁴ Ibn al-Fāqih, *Kitāb al-Bulḍān*, p. 102.

²⁵ D. Nir, *Geomorphology of Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 83 (in Hebrew).

²⁶ Y. Peleg and T. Raz, *The Rivers of Israel and their Basins* (Ministry of Agriculture, Soil Preservation Division, Survey and Mapping Department, 1975), (in Hebrew).

²⁷ N. Karmon and others (eds.) *Atlas of Israel, Cartography, Physical Geography, Human and Economic Geography, History* (Survey of Israel, Ministry of Labour, Jerusalem, and Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1970), Map ii/3 (soil map).

²⁸ D. 'Amiran, "The seismic centre of Lod and the sea-shore bend of Jaffa", *Eretz-Israel*, I (Sefer Schwabe), pp. 173–7. See also Map, p. 176 (in Hebrew).

²⁹ The field survey I conducted in the al-Ramla region revealed some six springs; nowadays their flow is too modest for any practical use. However it is possible that before the modern intensive use of the coastal aquifer, their

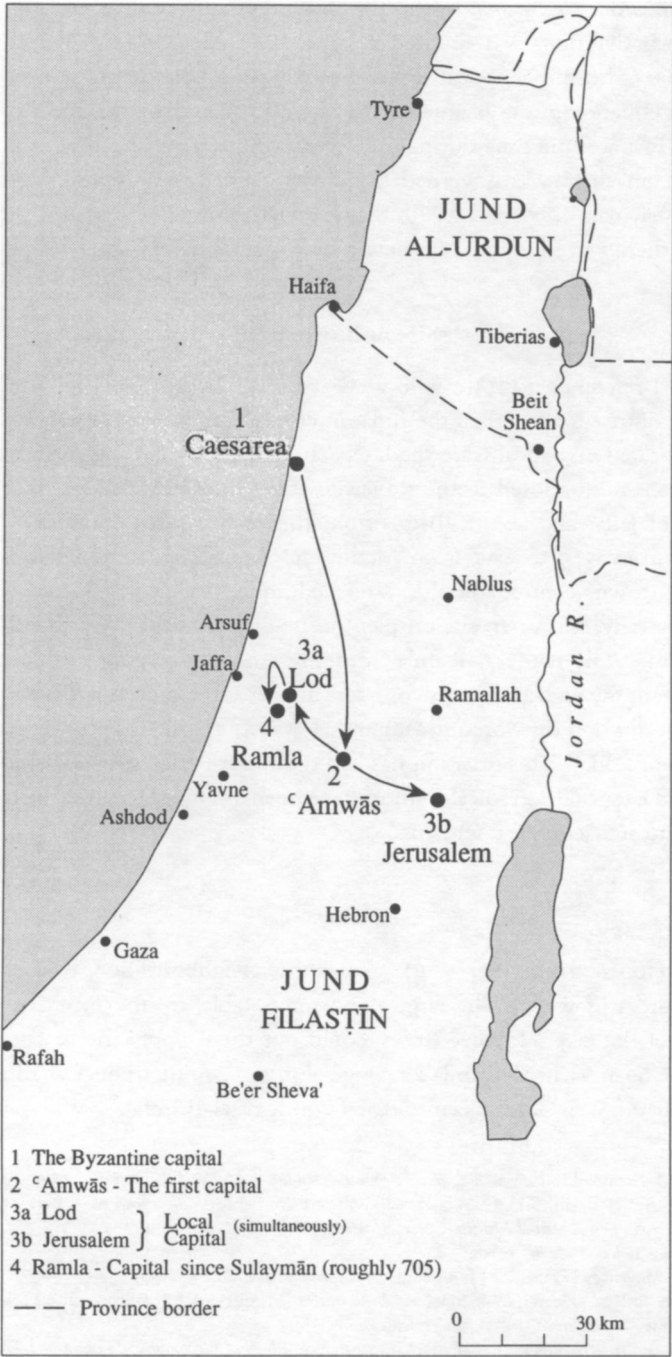


Figure 1: The changes in the location of the capital of Filastin.
(A proposal)

limits of al-Ramla and its immediate neighbourhood there are no permanent water sources. The subterranean water layer under the town is to be found at a depth of 25–30 m. To ensure a sufficient water supply, both the inhabitants and the government undertook a number of steps, among them digging wells, preparing plastered cisterns (to collect rainwater) and public works such as an aqueduct.

Al-Muqaddasī relates that the town was located on a plain, near mountains as well as the sea.³⁰ This situation between the central mountain ridge and the coastal plain gave al-Ramla an excellent position of dominance over Filastīn, ensuring the governor's easy control and easy access to all parts of the province. The town was comfortably near the sea, but not so as to open it to sudden Byzantine attacks; nor was it too far from the mountains. Its situation near Lod was not accidental. The latter constituted an important crossing of longitudinal and transversal roads.³¹ Sulaymān made good use of the conditions he found to establish a new Umayyad administrative centre near the older town.³² A convincing proof of the convenient location of al-Ramla lies in the road system developed around the new town.

An examination of the Umayyad road network around al-Ramla will show how it took over Lod's central position as one of the main crossroads in Palestine. Al-Ramla became an important way-station in the chief longitudinal channel serving the Muslim state communications, from Damascus to al-Fuṣṭāṭ (the future Cairo). Ibn Khuradādhbih even stresses al-Ramla's position on the road taken by Rādhānite merchants on their way to Andalus.³³ Even at the local-regional level, al-Ramla served as a central junction between the various towns of the province, e.g. the main road from Jerusalem to Jaffa.³⁴

After its foundation, al-Ramla swiftly acceded to the position of an important crossroads. The new town made the best use of its superb situation and took over Lod's historical hegemony. The same process occurred regarding the hinterland. In the tenth century al-Muqaddasī depicts al-Ramla's excellent situation and its strong agricultural hinterland:

Al-Ramla, the capital of Filastīn, is a beautiful city . . . its produce is abundant; [it is surrounded] on all sides by prosperous farms and magnificent towns, both its sacred places and its villages are well kept . . . no flour is better than its flour, no villages are more blessed, no fruits are sweeter.³⁵

Quite probably, this description was coloured by local pride and patriotism. Its importance lies in assuring us that al-Ramla was surrounded by enough agricultural settlements to

flow was more copious. See for example, R. Kark and T. Shiloni, "The resettlement of Gezer", in E. Shiler (ed.), *Sefer Ze'v Vilnay* (in Hebrew) p. 339, and in a field survey conducted in 1943 the spring of Gezer is described as a powerful source of water. (A report from the "Hagana" intelligence records).

³⁰ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 164.

³¹ On roads to Lod, see I. Roll, "The Roman road system in Judaea", in L. I. Levine (ed.), *The Jerusalem Cathedral*, iii (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 139 (map). See also, Avi Yona, *Historical Geography*, p. 84 (map).

³² On new Muslim cities built juxtaposed to older ones, see N. Alsayyad, *Cities and Caliphs* (New York, 1991), p. 3.

³³ Ibn Khuradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, pp. 154–5. On the Rādhānites, see M. Gil, "The Rādhānite merchants and the land of Rādhān", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XVII, (1974), pp. 299–328; E. Ashton, "Aperçus sur les Rādhānites", *Studies on the Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages* (London, 1978), pp. 245–65.

³⁴ On the road system in Filastīn and Palestine as a whole see G. Welmsley, *The Administrative Structure and Urban Geography of the Jund of Filastīn and the Jund al-Urdunn*, (Ph.D. Dissertation, Sydney, 1987), pp. 192–252.

³⁵ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 164.

ensure its supply. Can this description from the tenth century document the situation at the beginning of the eighth? The answer lies in finding out what was the position regarding Lod. And indeed, we learn that during the Roman–Byzantine era Lod was the centre of a rich farming region.³⁶ Thus, al-Ramla took over both the developed road system of the region and the extended hinterland. The combination of a favourable situation and administrative preeminence led to al-Ramla's swift expansion and development.

Physical layout and urban model

Quite often, one finds that the urban picture constitutes a physical reflection of the relationship between a civilization and a given geographical area. In the case of al-Ramla, this bond is utterly fascinating, since it was created at a time when the different patterns – which would later become the hallmarks of Muslim urban culture – were still crystallizing. Thus, the study of the urban patterns of al-Ramla offers an important contribution to the understanding of Umayyad concepts of urbanization.

Main urban components

In order to understand the town's structure, all available archaeological evidence on al-Ramla's first stages was put together.³⁷ The different sites were numbered and placed over a map of modern al-Ramla.³⁸

Fortifications

The earliest mention of al-Ramla's wall was made by the Persian traveller Nāṣir-ī Khushraw (1047).³⁹ Was there a wall to Umayyad al-Ramla? One may look for a probable answer in many of the Umayyad sites which have been excavated. Most of the Umayyad sites had a wall surrounding the buildings.⁴⁰ One important example is found in the 'Anjar excavations in the Lebanese *Biqā'*, where a surrounding wall was discovered.⁴¹ This site is highly

³⁶ J. J. Schwartz, *Lod (Lydda), Israel from its Origins through the Byzantine Period 5600 B.C.E.–640 C.E.*, BAR International Series 571 (Oxford, 1991), pp. 163–9. See also map, p. 186.

³⁷ Record Files 157 and The al-Ramla File. The perusal of these files by courtesy of Israel Antiquities Authority.

³⁸ Notes on Fig. 2.

a) The dating of strata by different excavators is not unequivocal. At times it is too general e.g. "Early Arab Period": at other times it is more precise such as "Umayyad" or "al-Mafjarī". In map I are included all sites described as "Early Arab Period", "Umayyad" or "al-Mafjarī".

b) The list of sites and excavations has been updated to June 1994.

c) It should be noted that no excavation yielded any material described by the researchers as Late Byzantine.

d) Sites no. 22, 23 were taken from the Survey of Western Palestine, 1878, Sheet 13, 16. Survey of Western Palestine, 1930, Palestine 1:20,000, sheet 13/14 al-Ramla.

³⁹ Abū Mu'in, Naṣir-ī Khushraw b. Hārith, *Safar Nāme*, ed. C. Schefer (Paris, 1881), p. 19.

⁴⁰ See, for example, K. A. C. Cresswell, *Early Muslim Architecture* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 381–9 (Kh' al-Minya), pp. 545–77 (Kh' al-Mafjar), pp. 506–18 (Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi), pp. 578–606 (Mshatta). See also, D. Whitcomb, "Evidence of the Umayyad period from the Aqaba excavation", in M. A. Bakhit and Robert Schick (eds.), *The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham During The Umayyad Period*, ii (Amman, 1989), p. 175.

⁴¹ M. Chehab, "The Umayyad palace at 'Anjar", *Ars Orientalis*, V (1963), pp. 17–25; K. A. C. Cresswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, pp. 471–8; *El²*, s.v. "'Anjar" (J. Sourdel-Thomin); H. K. Chehab, "On the identification of 'Anjar (Ayn al-Jarr) as an Umayyad foundation", *Muqarnas*, X (1993), pp. 42–8. Oxford,

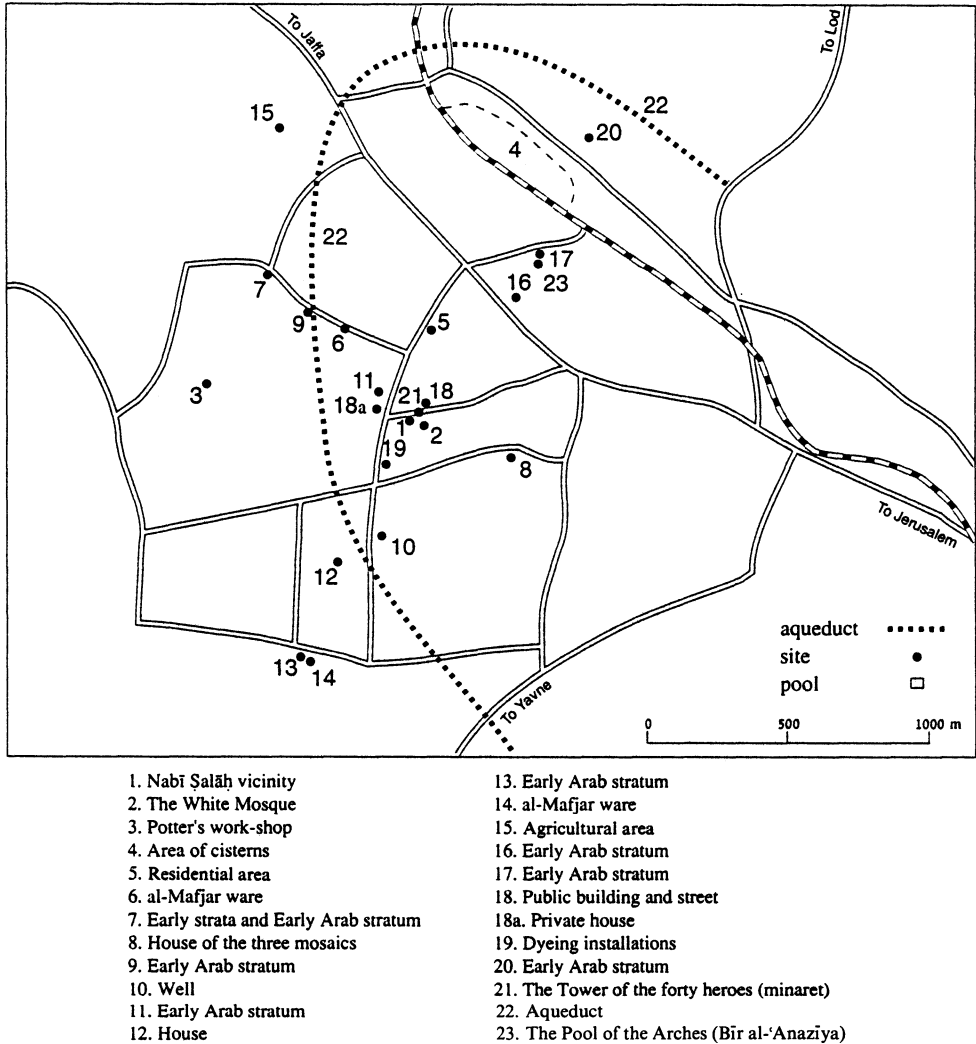


Figure 2. Umayyad Ramla – Map of excavation and sites

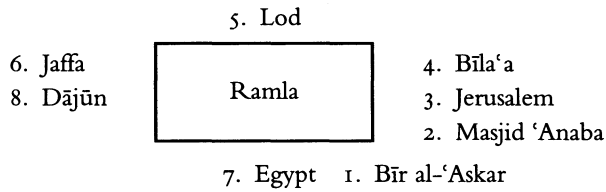
important to our understanding of al-Ramla due to the proximity of the inception of the two sites which were built by the Umayyads apparently for the same purpose, namely to serve as political and administrative centres. Consequently one should regard 'Anjar as a sister or a twin city to al-Ramla.⁴² Thus, the existence of a wall around a contemporaneous centre, established in similar circumstances, strongly supports the assumption that al-Ramla as well had a wall from the very start. Furthermore, other Umayyad works all over the Muslim world show us that a wall was thought of as an essential element.

⁴² The idea that al-Ramla and 'Anjar have a similar origin and were built for the same functions was first suggested by Sourdel: see Sourdel, "La fondation umayyade d'al-Ramla en Palestine".

City gates

Al-Muqaddasī mentions eight gates to al-Ramla. The later Mujīr al-Dīn counts a dozen gates. This number seems excessive for a town of al-Ramla's size; important and larger towns such as Byzantine Jerusalem or Fāṭimid Cairo did not have as many. In 'Anjar, the "sister" city, only four gates were revealed in the excavation. Therefore I will tentatively accept al-Muqaddasī's number, and schematically draw their positions in the city wall, relating them to the main settlements lying in that direction.

Location of the main gates after al-Muqaddasī⁴³
(schematic sketch)



Three gates were directed to the east, one to the north, two to the west and one or two to the south (the location of Bīr al-'Askar gate is uncertain due to the fact that we are not familiar with the location of a place of that name). On the eastern side of the sketch three gates are drawn. The directions of the centres bearing those gates' names are almost identical when related to their real direction relative to al-Ramla. This fact leads to the supposition that each gate was called by different names at different times and that al-Muqaddasī for some reason brought together all the synonymous names from different periods in al-Ramla's history. Mujīr al-Dīn mentions four gates (by name) only, one in each direction, or one in each side of the wall, named after the main centre lying in that direction – or else he gave only the names of the main gates. It appears that – at least at that time – al-Ramla did not possess twelve gates, and it is doubtful that there were even eight.

The network of streets

Mujīr al-Dīn states that, from the main gates, marketplaces extended into the town centre.⁴⁴ This reminds one of the network of streets found in the 'Anjar excavation; there also four streets led from the chief gates to the centre, where they met at right angles.⁴⁵ There the archaeologist found a construction which he describes as a "Tetrapylon". The most striking trait confirming the relationship and the similarity between 'Anjar and al-Ramla is the finding of shops along those four streets at 'Anjar. Their number confirms the commercial character of those streets and shows that they constituted the business centre of the town. Moreover, the lack of a central market place supports this assumption. The 'Anjar street network was built, according to the excavation findings, following

⁴³ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 164. In this sketch and the discussion that follows I assume that al-Muqaddasī's description is arranged systematically and depicts the gates in a consistent order.

⁴⁴ Mujīr al-Dīn, *Al-Uns al-Jalīl*, p. 417.

⁴⁵ Chehab, "The Umayyad palace".

Roman urban principles, namely, a main longitudinal street crossing a main transversal street at right angles. Their intersection generated a focus for the whole city, further marked by a tetrapylon.

Therefore we learn from the sources that there was a system of main streets in al-Ramla, and, in the light of the congruence with the excavations at 'Anjar, we may conclude that the system followed an orthogonal Roman plan. At the time of writing, the only finding on the spot is that of Rosenberger (see Fig. 2, site 18) north of the White Mosque. In this excavation, a paved street was allocated, running from East to West, along the northern side of the White Mosque.⁴⁶ This street was dated to the eighth century, and constitutes the first evidence of a street in Umayyad al-Ramla. Its width (5.5 m.) and the quality of the paving show a high standard of public works. This, together with its propinquity to the central buildings of the town, would indicate that the street actually was one of the main thoroughfares leading from the gates to the centre – along which, as mentioned, the town markets developed.

The markets

Al-Ramla's markets were famous for the quality of their wares, of which al-Muqaddasī especially noted the juicy fruit and the excellent flour.⁴⁷ Further descriptions of those markets are to be found in Mujīr al-Dīn and in al-Ḥimyarī (d. 1326).⁴⁸ These sources offer quite similar urban patterns, but differ in a number of details. Following is the picture of the markets as given by Mujīr al-Dīn:

... and it has four markets extending from four gates to the centre, where there is also a Friday Mosque. From the Jaffa gate to the onion market to the wheat market up to the Mosque. From the Jerusalem gate [extends] the cotton-sellers' market, and from this the flax-weavers' and then the scent market and the Mosque. From the Yāzūr gate to the wood-sellers' market⁴⁹ and from there to the leather-workers' and then the vegetable market⁵⁰ and to the Mosque. From the last gate, the market of the honers (sharpeners, grinders), the saddlers' market and to the Mosque.⁵¹

Thus, we see that a system of specialized markets developed along the main streets, running from the main gates to the mosque.

The White Mosque area

This was the heart of the Umayyad town, where the most significant archaeological findings were discovered.⁵² It may be divided into three well-defined areas:

⁴⁶ Rosenberger (personal communication). The excavations were held in 1991; the report has not yet been published.

⁴⁷ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Ibn 'Abd Mun'am al-Ḥimyarī, *Kitāb al-Rawḍ al-Mi'tār fī Khabar al-Aqtār*, ed. A. 'Abbās (Beirut, 1975), p. 268.

⁴⁹ Mujīr al-Dīn mentions the term Sūq al-Ḥabbābīn, namely the grain-sellers' market, while al-Ḥimyarī uses the term Sūq al-Hashshabīn i.e. the wood-sellers' market. I preferred al-Ḥimyarī's version; see also H. Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jerusalem et Hebron* (Paris, 1876), p. 205.

⁵⁰ According to al-Ḥimyarī it was the water sellers' market: al-Ḥimyarī, *Kitāb al-Rawḍ*, p. 268.

⁵¹ Mujīr al-Dīn, *Al-Uns al-Jalil*, p. 417.

⁵² The reconstruction of the area of the White Mosque is based on Kaplan, "Excavation", E. Yanai, "Excavation at the area of the White Mosque", al-Ramla files, Israel Antiquities Authority, Rosenberger (personal communication). I wish to thank A. Rosenberger for presenting me with findings as yet unpublished.

1. The area of the White Mosque (see Fig. 2, site 2).
2. A public building and a street north of the mosque (Fig. 2, site 21).
3. Zone of apparent industrial tanks⁵³ (Fig. 2, site 20).

Al-Balādhurī (d. 892) mentions that Sulaymān built in al-Ramla the governor's palace, a mosque and the House of the Dyers.⁵⁴ This description of a conjunction of public buildings and industrial installations (of still unclear nature) is replicated by the physical findings. So it should not be far-fetched to see the vicinity of the White Mosque as the municipal focus of Umayyad al-Ramla: there rose the religious centre, an important public building and what may be called the town's industrial centre.

Dwellings

The various excavations at al-Ramla have revealed a number of residential buildings (Fig. 2, sites 8, 12, 18a). The most luxurious (8) stood near the town centre, and boasted three mosaic floors with mainly geometrical motifs. Those were dated to the eighth century by M. Rosen-Ayalon.⁵⁵

Waterworks

Al-Balādhurī and others mention that Sulaymān had an aqueduct (*qanāt*) built: it was known as *Barada*. He also had many wells and water reservoirs dug in the town.⁵⁶

The aqueduct and its course. – The most comprehensive survey of the al-Ramla district was undertaken by the Survey of Western Palestine (SWP) in 1874.⁵⁷ According to its findings, the aqueduct went from Tel-Gezer in a general northwesterly direction to al-Ramla. A number of researchers have suggested that the aqueduct started at Rosh ha-'Ayin.⁵⁸ The latter assumption is apparently based on the analysis of a tenth-century chronicle relating the battle between the Qarmaṭīs and the Fāṭimids: Rosh ha-'Ayin was occupied at that time by the Qarmaṭīs, who (according to that chronicler) denied its waters to Fāṭimid al-Ramla.⁵⁹ At first sight, this source should disprove the SWP evaluation; however, it is

⁵³ On those tanks see H. Soreq, and E. Ayalon (eds.), (Eretz-Israel Museum Catalog), *Color from Nature, on Natural Colors in History* (Tel-Aviv, 1993), pp. 33–4 and 36. The existence of dyeing installations in the centre of the city would have been a nuisance due to the strong smells. In a new site recently excavated in al-Ramla, the archaeologist on site, Mr D. Glick, was kind enough to show me an industrial facility also linked to dyeing. Its location, some 800 m. from the White Mosque, makes it a much more logical site. The lack of definite dating and data prevents us from reaching a conclusion.

⁵⁴ Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, p. 143.

⁵⁵ M. Rosen-Ayalon, "The first mosaic discovered in al-Ramla", *Israel Exploration Journal*, XXVI (1976), p. 109–19.

⁵⁶ Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, p. 143; al-Mas'ūdī *Kitāb al-Tanbih*, p. 359; Ibn al-Fāqih, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, p. 102; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, p. 818.

⁵⁷ Survey of Western Palestine (SWP), sheets 13, 16 (1874).

⁵⁸ M. Gil, "The sixty year war (969–1029)", *Shalem, Studies in the History of the Jews in Eretz Israel*, III (1981), p. 15 (in Hebrew). M. Sharon, "Palestine cities under the rule of Islam", *Cathedra*, XL (1987), p. 113 (in Hebrew), where he states that it is not clear whether the aqueduct started in Rosh ha-'Ayin or al-Ramla; S. A. D. Jawda, *Madinat al-Ramla mundhu Nashā'ihā hattā 'Ām 492 H–1099 A.D.* (Beirut, 1986), p. 197.

⁵⁹ Thabit b. Sinān, *Ta'riḥ Akhbār al-Qāramita*, ed. S. Zakār (Beirut, 1961), p. 67. I wish to thank Dr A. Elad for bringing this source to my attention.

not supported by the topographical characteristics of the region: the altitude of the Yarqon river sources at Rosh ha-'Ayin is no more than 14 m., while al-Ramla sits at about 80 m. above sea level. Such a difference of level is enough to prevent the Rosh ha-'Ayin sources from reaching al-Ramla through an aqueduct (based on gravitation).

Can the route of the al-Ramla aqueduct be drawn? As noted above, the SWP survey located some remains between Tel-Gezer and al-Ramla; they were still to be seen on the ground in the nineteen-fifties and sixties.⁶⁰ Nowadays, due to intensive agricultural and building activity in the region, it has become difficult to identify the remains. In a survey I made, I found cut stones still retaining cementing material, in two sites along the SWP route. It should be mentioned that within al-Ramla itself the aqueduct planners took into consideration the main buildings, especially the White Mosque.⁶¹ To sum up: following the SWP survey, investigations in situ and the sheer impossibility of bringing water from Rosh ha-'Ayin, we may conclude that Sulaymān's Barada started on the west side of Tel Gezer and brought the water to al-Ramla, a path of about 10 km.

Additional waterworks

The archaeological excavations have revealed many lime-coated cisterns in al-Ramla and its neighbourhood. Under the White Mosque three underground reservoirs (with a combined capacity of over 6,000 cu. m.³!) were excavated. The al-Ramla waterworks may be divided into three groups:

1. The aqueduct attributed to Sulaymān.
2. Pools and subterranean reservoirs.
3. Wells and lime-coated cisterns (mainly in private residential zones).

Cemeteries

Graves from the early Islamic period have been discovered in the excavation in the north of al-Ramla (see Fig. 2, site 4). It is conceivable that this zone, on the periphery of the ancient city centre, served as the main burial site at the time.

Other urban elements

The lack of comprehensive excavations has prevented the finding of many urban elements that in all probability existed in al-Ramla, according to mentions in various sources. E.g., al-Muqaddasī notes elaborate inns (*Fanādiq*) and pleasant baths (*Ḥammāmāt*).⁶² Were such amenities available in the Umayyad town? By comparison with other, better explored,

⁶⁰ See Z. Vilnay, *Ramla Past and Present* (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 35 (in Hebrew) reports a remnant of the aqueduct in the vicinity of Tel Gezer. I wish to thank Mr T. Tsuk for bringing to my attention the existence of a photo of the aqueduct (taken in the fifties by Prof. R. Gofna), probably of the same site referred to by Vilnay.

⁶¹ See Kaplan, "Excavation", p. 110, where he describes the channelling of a section of the aqueduct to the reservoirs of the White Mosque.

⁶² Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 164, also W. Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte*, i (Leiden, 1955), p. 63.

Umayyad sites, it is reasonable to assume that public baths and inns for the numerous merchants visiting the city already existed at the time.⁶³

In a letter (from the Geniza documents) from the late eleventh century, a Jew from al-Ramla by the name of Abraham b. Furāt is mentioned as head of the dysentery ward in the hospital (*bīmāristān*) of the city.⁶⁴ Can one deduce therefore that a hospital existed in the Umayyad city of al-Ramla? A comment is in order regarding the mediaeval Jewish sources, namely the Geniza. The abundant material found in the Geniza documents dates mainly to the eleventh and twelfth century A.D. Contrary to post-Crusades Arabic sources, such as Mujīr al-Dīn who specifically notes that his description is attributed to the early 'Islamic period in al-Ramla, the Geniza documents (due to the fact that they are accurately dated material) – important as they may be – can not be of any real use in an attempt to reconstruct the urban picture at the beginning of the eighth century A.D. It would be hazardous, not to say unfounded, to use it as relevant evidence relating to the earlier periods of the city. Regarding the hospital, one should add that there is no earlier reference to an institution of such nature in the city and most probably it dates to a post-Sulaymānic period.

The urban model of Umayyad al-Ramla – a proposed reconstruction

At the outset of the discussion of the model of al-Ramla one should stress the hypothetical nature of the debate. The solid information from the Umayyad city is very scarce. In the light of the lack of a large body of evidence (mainly of an archaeological nature) the reconstruction of the model of the city relies mostly on literary evidence and information derived from comparable sites. Until more data is attained from future excavations in the city one should use only the term “proposal” to describe accurately the reconstruction of the model of the city. Nevertheless in spite of the “hypothetical nature” of the debate I hope to demonstrate that the town planning at al-Ramla was part of a comprehensive and existing urban perception manifested by the Muslims (i.e. the Umayyads) in the early Islamic period throughout the region.

Al-Muqaddasī gives the dimensions of the city as “a mile by a mile”.⁶⁵ This means a square pattern where each side measured under 2 km; thus, the urban area in the tenth century measured between 3 to 4 sq. km., a spread significantly larger than that of other towns in the region. However, given the unusual size attributed to al-Ramla and the fact that al-Muqaddasī wrote in the tenth century, we may strongly doubt that Umayyad al-Ramla had reached this size. For the purposes of this paper, the numbers given cannot be accepted literally; until further evidence becomes available, it is impossible to estimate how near was al-Muqaddasī's area to Sulaymān's original plan. One piece of evidence for the size of the intended Umayyad metropolis is the location of the Pool of the Arches built by Hārūn al-Rashīd in A.D. 789, over seventy years after the foundation of al-Ramla. The pool is located over 500 m. away from the White Mosque; it would be quite unlikely for it to be placed outside the urban precinct.⁶⁶

⁶³ On the *ḥammām* in 'Anjār, see Chehab, “The Umayyad palace”. On an inn dated to the tenth century, M. Sharon, “A waqf inscription from al-Ramlah”, *Arabica*, XXIII, 1 (1966), pp. 77–84.

⁶⁴ See, S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, ii (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), pp. 243–4.

⁶⁵ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 165.

⁶⁶ On the location of the Pool of the Arches in relation to the White Mosque, see fig. 2.

The previous discussion of the fortifications served to show that al-Ramla had a wall with no more than eight gates. Quite probably, there was on each side a main gate and possibly ancillary ones. From each main gate, a wide street led to the centre, as described by Mujīr al-Dīn, where the main mosque (the White Mosque) was located.⁶⁷ Al-Muqaddasī's description is slightly different: he had the White Mosque in the zone of the markets, without making it the focus of the town.⁶⁸ Sulaymān had established a number of buildings to serve as urban foci: the governor's palace (the government centre), the House of the Dyers (which might be seen as the industrial centre) and naturally the religious centre – the White Mosque. The chief economic centres were the markets that developed, according to the various sources, along the main thoroughfares. Many waterworks were found, some inside the central buildings and others all over town, showing a considerable investment in both the public and the private sector.

The model presented in the foregoing paragraphs was that of a regular geometric pattern, i.e., a pattern of orthogonal main streets; at their crossing an urban focus developed, and in its neighbourhood were built the important urban centres. In the assumption that the city had an orthogonal plan I rely heavily on Sourdél who called this model a network or chequered pattern, derived from classical town plans.⁶⁹ As mentioned above detailed information about the general plan of al-Ramla is scarce, therefore it is difficult to estimate whether the plan suggested was applied to the whole of the urban area. Analyzing the town remains, we may accept that the guiding principles were adopted from classical town patterns. Yet further proof is needed to compensate for the dearth of concrete evidence. I shall show that in other Muslim sites in the region, especially Umayyad ones, the classical model has served as the main source of the plan.

Comparable sites

As discussed above, the nearest settlement, in time and in purpose, was 'Anjar, founded in the Lebanese Biqā' at the time of al-Walid (ruled 705–15). Sourdél points out the similarity of the plans of al-Ramla and 'Anjar; in his view, both towns were founded to answer Umayyad administrative needs. 'Anjar was built as a walled rectangle with four gates. The streets, as revealed by excavations, followed an orthogonal pattern, dominated by the main longitudinal and transversal thoroughfares and boasting a large number of shops. Hard by the main crossing, a mosque was built, with a governor's palace (*Dār al-Imārā*) on its southern side. Evidently, the planning model the Umayyads followed was the classical orthogonal one. More than that, the planned site at 'Anjar proves that the Umayyads had a clear conception of town planning which they employed when a new site was to be erected. As I see it, the amply documented plan of 'Anjar confirms and matches what we know of al-Ramla, from the chronicles and from the scant excavations.

Another site attributed to the Umayyad period is that of 'Aqaba, lately excavated by Whitcomb.⁷⁰ This town also followed the classical orthogonal plan. In summing up his findings from Ayla Whitcomb concludes:

⁶⁷ Mujīr al-Dīn, *Al-Uns al-Jalīl*, p. 417.

⁶⁸ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥṣan*, p. 165.

⁶⁹ Sourdél, "Umayyade al-Ramla", p. 391.

⁷⁰ D. Whitcomb, "Evidence of the Umayyad period from the 'Aqaba excavation", in M. A. Bakhit and Robert

The Amṣār like Ayla were far more widespread than has been considered previously. Indeed one may suggest that such planned communities occurred in most places that immigrants settled in numbers. One of the common characteristics of the Amṣār is that they were situated in proximity to an older town or city. Beyond the obvious reason of political control, one may suggest that the older models of urban organizations were consciously subjected to new adaptations, to new Muslim attitudes toward urban structure.⁷¹

The similarity with al-Ramla is striking especially regarding the town planning and the proximity of both cities to older settlement. One needs to stress that using the term *miṣr* to describe al-Ramla should not be understood as referring to the military nature that the city might have had. In the case of al-Ramla the broader definition as was given by Whitcomb is more appropriate: "military camp, as a provincial capital, and ultimately as an Islamic urban settlement".⁷² The city of al-Ramla was planned and erected more than sixty years after the Muslims came to dominate the area. The city functioned more as an administrative centre than a military one. More than that, we learn from the sources that the civilian community from Lod (namely Christians, Jews and Samaritans)⁷³ was forced to emigrate to the newly founded city a short time after its inception. Furthermore, this model was also the basis of the planning for many of the complexes called "Umayyad palaces".⁷⁴ In sites such as Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Sharqī, Madīnat al-Fār and Qal'at 'Amman the orthogonal plan, derived most probably from the Roman camp, was used during the Umayyad phase of the construction.⁷⁵

One may conclude therefore that when a new site/city was constructed during the early Islamic period the classic orthogonal plan was the model used or improvised upon in many cases. This conclusion corresponds with Northedge's general survey and particular cases discussed above at length, i.e. 'Aqaba and 'Anjar. The similarities between the literary evidence concerning al-Ramla, in the case of the streets for example, and the actual pattern one finds in contemporary Umayyad and pre-Umayyad sites gives more credibility to the proposed reconstruction suggested above, namely that the city had an orthogonal plan.

How near is the reconstruction proposed in Fig. 3 (see p. 44) to the urban reality of Umayyad-al-Ramla? An answer, limited as it may be, may be obtained through an analysis of the urban situation in the zone of the White Mosque, from where most of the findings originated – certainly the most important. A map of the archaeological sites will confirm the central position of this mosque, as compared to any other findings. A thorough examination

Schick (eds.), *The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham During The Umayyad Period*, ii (Ammam, 1989), p. 175; *idem*, "Medieval Aqaba: a brief report on the 1986 and 1987 seasons", in *Syria, Revue d'Art Oriental et d'Archéologie*, LXV (Paris, 1988), pp. 423–5; *idem*, "A Fāṭimid residence at 'Aqaba, Jordan", *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, XXXII (1988), pp. 207–23.

⁷¹ *Idem*, "The miṣr of Ayla: settlement at al-'Aqaba in the early Islamic period", in G.R.D. King and A.Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton, 1994), p. 168.

⁷² *Idem*, p. 168. See also Northedge's remark concerning the non-military character of some of the Amṣār, A. Northedge, "Archaeology and new urban settlement in early Islamic Syria and Iraq", in G.R.D. King and A. Cameron (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Land Use and Settlement Patterns* (Princeton, 1994), p. 232.

⁷³ Al-Ya'qubī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, ed. M.J. De Goeje, p. 328.

⁷⁴ See for example Creswell, (above, n. 40). On Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Sharqī see, O. Grabar *et al.*, *City in the Desert. Qaṣr al-Hayr East* (Cambridge, 1978), two volumes.

⁷⁵ For a comprehensive overview of urban settlement in Syria and Iraq with regard to the archaeological data, see Northedge (above n. 72), pp. 231–65, Figs. 42–7.

will indicate that it actually constituted the centre and focus of the Umayyad town; from this conclusion the model was built. Moreover, it stresses the Muslim foundation of al-Ramla: only in a city planned for Muslims would the mosque be located at its hub, making it most readily accessible to the believers. In towns predating the Muslim conquest (as were most cities in the region), the mosques would not find a place at the centre of the town, simply because it had already been built and settled when the Muslims arrived – as witness Jerusalem and Damascus.

As shown, the planning of al-Ramla relied heavily on classical principles.⁷⁶ There as elsewhere, one can see that in planning new towns the Muslims accepted the planning norms obtaining in the region, with some adaptations for their specific requirements. The extent of the urban plan and the size of a number of its components go to show how al-Ramla also served as the realization of Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik's personal ambitions.

For the purpose of creating the following proposed reconstruction, I used mainly al-Muqaddasī's and Mujīr al-Dīn's descriptions and based upon them the basic plan of the city. More information was added from various sources such as the archaeological findings from the centre of the city. In addition to that data I relied on the plan of 'Anjar as a main source of comparison and analogy. This was done, for example, in the case of the main thoroughfares and the markets which are depicted here in the manner they were found in the excavation of 'Anjar.

Urban characteristics

Al-Ramla as a political-administrative centre

Al-Ramla was founded expressly to serve as the capital of Filastīn. It was the seat of the administrators and functionaries appointed to handle the province's current affairs. One such was Nu'aym b. Salām al-Urdunnī, in charge of the *Diwān al-Khātām*, the governor's office of the Seal.⁷⁷ Sulaymān's palace, also serving as the house of government, about which al-Balādhurī speaks, was built on a focal point in the town, to show its physical and symbolic importance in the cityscape.

Al-Ramla as an economic centre

The different sources present al-Ramla as the district commercial centre, especially regarding agricultural produce; thus al-Ramla took over Lod's previous position.⁷⁸ At the same time, al-Ramla became an international trading emporium; one should note again that it was a station for the Rādhānite merchants.⁷⁹ An interesting indication of al-Ramla's extended commercial bonds in the Muslim world is the mention of its inhabitant Yaḥyā b.

⁷⁶ Kennedy has already demonstrated that despite urban decline in Late Antiquity the Muslims were very strict in preserving the Roman guidelines of urban planning, H. Kennedy, "From polis to madina: urban change in late antique and early Islamic Syria", *Past and Present*, CVI (1985), p. 17.

⁷⁷ Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Ḥajjāj, Yūsuf al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl fi Asma' al-Rijāl*, ix, ed. 'A. Ma'rūf (Beirut, 1987), p. 172; Gil, *Palestine*, p. 100.

⁷⁸ Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, pp. 180–1.

⁷⁹ See above, note 33.

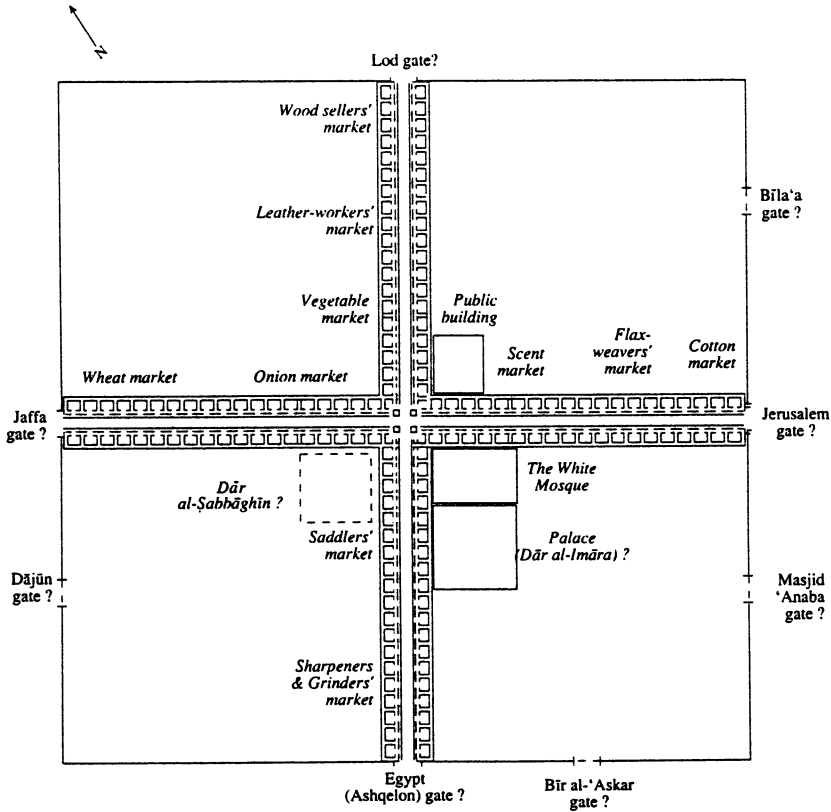


Figure 3. Umayyad Ramla – a proposed reconstruction

‘Isā b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Tamīmī al-Nashalī al-Kūfī al-Fākhūrī al-Ramlī, who apparently lived there at the beginning of the ninth century; he was known both as a relater of traditions (*muḥaddith*) and an exporter of olive oil to various towns, among them Kūfa, from where his family stemmed.⁸⁰

A number of industrial branches flourished in al-Ramla, among them weaving and dyeing. Quite conceivably, this explains the industrial tanks found near the White Mosque and lately also northeast of the Pool of Arches.⁸¹ Another manufacture discovered in the excavations of Eytan and Rosen-Ayalon was pottery (Fig. 2, site 3) and many of its products, all dated to the eighth century; which indicates that this industry was active since the beginnings of al-Ramla.⁸²

Mentions in biographies indicate the inhabitants’ occupations, among them: makers of

⁸⁰ ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥamad al-Sam’anī, *al-Ansāb*, iii, ed. al-Bārūdī (Beirut, 1408/1988), pp. 91, 170. Ibn Ḥajar, Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-‘Asqalānī, *Thadhib al-Tahdhib*, xi (Haydarabad, 1326), pp. 230–1. Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā’*, x, ed. Sh. al-‘Arnū’ut (Beirut, 1981–8), pp. 423–4.

⁸¹ On the fabrics of al-Ramla, see al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, p. 181.

⁸² Rosen, Ayalon and Eitan, *Excavations at al-Ramla – Findings from the Eighth Century*.

scents, coppersmiths, potters, herdsmen, cloth sellers and sellers of date branches.⁸³ Governmental initiative and favourable conditions contributed to make al-Ramla an important and developed economic centre.

Al-Ramla as a Muslim city

Physical Islamic elements in the urban landscape

Evidently, the chief element was the Friday Mosque, called the White Mosque. In the scheme of the town, it is easy to see it sited at the very focus, as part of the city's heart. This, together with its size and magnificence, clearly demonstrated the town's Islamic origin and character. Only in a town created by Muslims could the Friday Mosque have been found at the very centre of the city.⁸⁴ Another such indication was the centrality of the bazaar or market complex, characteristic of Muslim urban concepts. Al-Ramla's economic-commercial character strengthens the case of those who see in Islam an essentially urban culture largely based on commerce and trade.⁸⁵ Of course, one should not overlook the very practical aspects of trade, in this as in any other town regardless of its dominant religion; nevertheless, its strongly commercial character is intimately bound up with its Islamic origins and population.

Al-Ramla as a Muslim religious centre

Quoting al-Muhallabī (d. 990), Yāqūt relates that a considerable group of religious scholars ('*ulamā*') was concentrated in al-Ramla.⁸⁶ This has also been noted by Sharon, who saw a clear relationship between the town's economic prosperity and the religious-cultural activity, which started shortly after its foundation.⁸⁷ In the Muslim biographical literature, there are personalities bearing the *nisba* (agnomen) al-Ramlī, indicating that they lived or stayed there for some time, or were otherwise related to the city. Among others, al-Sam'ānī compiles a long list of transmitters called al-Ramlī; some of them clearly lived there.⁸⁸

Shortly after the foundation of the town, dozens of scholars lived or just stayed in al-Ramla for a period, active in religious studies and especially in the relating of traditions (*muḥaddithūn*). One example was the famous Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778) who lived in Kūfa, but visited al-Ramla and was known for transmitting traditions to the scholars of al-Ramla

⁸³ E.g. al-Walid b. Ṭalaḥa who is also called al-'Aṭṭār, meaning a scent merchant: al-Dhahabī, *Siyar*, ix, p. 325.

⁸⁴ I write this at the risk of being considered dogmatic. So much has been written lately concerning the origin and character of the Islamic city that I make a point here of going back and concentrating on these simple characteristics of what seem to me the natural and basic features of an Islamic city in the eighth century. See also Alsayyad, *Cities and Caliphs*, pp. 52, 63, 122. Alsayyad sketches models of early Islamic cities where the focal point of the city is taken by the Friday mosque.

⁸⁵ Lapidus sees in the market area (*bāzār*) not only the economic centre but a political one as well, I. M. Lapidus, "Traditional Muslim cities", in C. L. Brown (ed.), *From Madina to Metropolis* (New Jersey, 1973), p. 63. On the linkage between the religious and commercial life in the Islamic city see N. Levtzion, *Comparative Study In Islamization* (New York, 1979), p. 15. On the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighth-ninth centuries see S. D. Goitein, "The rise of the Middle-Eastern bourgeoisie in early Islamic times", in *idem*, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden, 1966).

⁸⁶ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, ii, p. 818.

⁸⁷ Sharon, "Palestine cities", p. 114.

⁸⁸ Al-Sam'ānī, *al-Ansāb*, iii, pp. 91–2. See also Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, ii, pp. 818–20; Mujīr al-Dīn, *Al-Uns al-Jalīl*, p. 418–19.

in the eighth century.⁸⁹ Thus the large number of sages ('*ulamā*') who settled in Umayyad al-Ramla and those who stayed there in their quest for *ḥadīth* indicate that the town became a centre of Islamic scholarship at an early stage.

Attempts to sanctify al-Ramla

In an effort to glorify al-Ramla and enhance its importance as an Islamic centre, there started a process of creation and diffusion of traditions purporting to show the town's antiquity, important events that happened there and Muslim personalities buried in the area. For instance, Ibn-Sa'ad reports a tradition whereby 'Ubada b. al-Ṣāmit, considered the first *qāḍī* of Palestine, died and was buried in al-Ramla in A.D. 645.⁹⁰ This tradition connecting one of the early Muslim personalities in the region to the town need not be taken at face value, as an historical fact, but as part of a widespread tendency to aggrandize Sulaymān's creation. As a part of this "canonization" of the al-Ramla area, a number of traditions were circulated connecting the town with Qur'ānic verses and with Muslim eschatology. A case in point is the tradition related by al-Basawī (d. 890), who identifies al-Ramla as the high plain (Rabwa) mentioned in the Qur'ān.

We were told by Abū-Yaḥyā, Zakariyā' b. Nāfi' al-Arsūfi and Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ramlī who said: we heard from 'Abbād b. 'Abbād Abū 'Utba who heard it from Abū-Zur'a who heard it from Ibn-Wa'la [here another tradition, which will not be related in this paper, is intercalated] who said: I heard it from Murra b. Ka'b al-Bahzī [and so in a chain (*isnād*) extending up to the Prophet] that al-Ramla is the *Rabwa*, seeing it extends⁹¹ from east to west.⁹²

The last transmitters in the chain are known as inhabitants of Filastīn. Muḥammad (Abd al-'Azīz al-Ramlī and Zakariyā' b. Nāfi' al-Arsūfi were active in the final years of the eighth century and the early ninth century.⁹³ Their source 'Abbād b. 'Abbād was also found in the district in the second half of the eighth century.⁹⁴ He was said to have received the tradition from one Abū-Zur'a, who appears to have been Yaḥyā Abī 'Amrū al-Saybānī al-Ramlī, a well-known transmitter of traditions from al-Ramla (d. 765).⁹⁵ About the first link in the chain, Ibn-Wa'la, nothing is presently known.

⁸⁹ Abū Nu'aym, Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'*, vi (Cairo, 1936), p. 367.

⁹⁰ Muḥammad b. Sa'd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, vii/2, ed. A. Sakḥaf (Leiden, 1928), p. 147. For more traditions that support this, see Gil, *Palestine*, pp. 88–9, n. 141. See also, Abū al-Qāsim ... Ibn Asakir, *Ta'rikh Madīnat Dimashq*, i, ed. Ṣ. al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1371/1951), p. 38, who relates a tradition cited by Ḍamara b. Rabī'a and Rajā' b. Abī Salama, who locate the grave in Jerusalem. See there also a tradition related by Rajā' Ibn Ḥaywa who says that he saw 'Ubāda's grave next to the eastern wall of Jerusalem. See also the opinion of the tenth-century Jerusalemite al-Muqaddasī who says he saw the grave in Jerusalem, al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan*, pp. 181–2.

⁹¹ Maybe it should be translated as "connecting". The verb *s.i.l.* can also refer to the flow of water, *Lisān al-'Arāb*, s.v., s.i.l.

⁹² Abū Yūsuf, Ya'qūb b. Sufyān al-Basawī, *Kitāb al-Ma'rifa wa-l-Ta'rikh*, ii, ed. A. Ṣ. al-'Umarī (Medina, 1410), p. 298. Ibn 'Asākir also relates this tradition, adding a number of slightly differing versions: when interpreting Qur'ānic verses, the smallest textual change is considered a different tradition; therefore Ibn 'Asākir punctiliously indicates who transmitted each version. On the different versions, see, Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh Madīnat Dimashq*, i, pp. 198–9. Those traditions are part of a general discussion regarding the *Rabwa*.

⁹³ Al-Basawī, *Kitāb al-Ma'rifa*, ii, p. 298; Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhib al-Kamāl*, xcvi, pp. 11–12; A. Elad, "Arsūf in the early Arab period (appendix 6)", in I. Roll and E. Ayalon (eds.), *Apollonia and Southern Sharon, a Model of a Coastal City and its Hinterland* (Tel-Aviv, 1989), pp. 299.

⁹⁴ Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhib al-Kamāl*, xiv, pp. 174–6. See also Elad, "Arsūf", p. 298.

⁹⁵ Al-Sam'anī, *al-Ansāb*, iii, p. 354. See also Gil, *Palestine*, p. 103.

A scrutiny of this chain of transmitters will show that four of its links lived in Filastīn; three of them certainly in al-Ramla. One gathers the impression that these links were the disseminators of the tradition discussed – perhaps its creators. This impression is reinforced by an analysis of the chains connected with other traditions mentioned by Ibn ‘Asākir. Palestinian transmitters appear in the *isnād* only when al-Ramla is associated with the *Rabwa*. They are conspicuously absent when the tradition associates the Qur’ānic *Rabwa* with Damascus, al-Fuṣṭāṭ or any other place. So one sees that as early as the middle of the eighth century there were attempts to link al-Ramla with locations mentioned in the Qur’ān. The fact that the city had not existed in the days of the Prophet is of no account in the eyes of those willing to prove he had referred to it.

The rationale for the foundation of Umayyad al-Ramla

Our discussion of al-Ramla and the evidence for its status and prosperity are not enough to explain the basic question – the rationale for its foundation. Why did the Muslims endeavour to found a new city in the province, especially a capital? Why was Jerusalem not chosen as capital, in view of the extensive Umayyad investment there? Was the decision supported by a complex of practical choices, or was it Sulaymān’s personal will? Assuming that the decision to transfer the capital to the coastal plain was laid down by the Umayyad Caliph, why was an existing and flourishing urban centre such as Lod not selected? Seeing that in Damascus, the heart of the Caliphate, the Muslim administrative centre was built in a Byzantine city many centuries old, what was the unsurmountable constraint regarding the capital of Filastīn?

I intend to show in the following pages that the foundation of al-Ramla was part of the Umayyad planning conception at both the macro and micro levels. It was the right choice for the Caliph in Damascus as well as for the governor of Filastīn.

Reasons given in Muslim sources

Al-Jahshiyārī (d. 942) describes the foundation of al-Ramla thus:

There was a man of Filastīn called Ibn Bīṭrīq who wrote [to Sulaymān] and advised him to build al-Ramla. This was because Ibn-Bīṭrīq had asked the men of Lod to give him a parcel of land that was in a church [probably near a church] where he wanted to build a house. Being refused he told them: By God, I shall ruin it [the church]. Then said [Sulaymān]: the Commander of the Faithful, ‘Abd al-Malik, built the Mosque of Bayt al-Maqdis on the rock [a dome] and was renowned for it, and al-Walīd built the Mosque of Damascus and became renowned for it, so if I build a mosque and a town and move people there [I shall be famous for it]. Thus he founded the town of al-Ramla and its mosque and thus caused the ruin of Lod.⁹⁶

In this chronicle two reasons are presented for the foundation of a new town, not necessarily interconnected; incidentally, they explain the decline of Lod. The first motive was Ibn Bīṭrīq’s advice. Yāqūt related a similar tradition he copied from al-Muqaddasī: Ibn Bīṭrīq was an official in Sulaymān’s administration and had sworn to ruin Lod because of

⁹⁶ Muḥammad b. ‘Abdus al-Jahshiyārī, *Kitāb al-Wuzarā’ wa-l-Kuttāb* (Cairo, 1938), p. 48.

their refusal to grant him some land.⁹⁷ According to the first part of this tradition, Lod was ruined due to Ibn Bīṭrīq's enmity. He managed to involve Sulaymān in his vendetta and persuade him to found a new town. Yet the other part of the chronicle presented a quite different motivation. Here the rationale is Sulaymān's ambition to be known as a great builder, like 'Abd al-Malik and al-Walīd. Al-Jahshiyārī, and Yāqūt (who quotes al-Muqaddasī) relate how Sulaymān healed a rift with representatives of the old administration (Christian clerics) by transferring his administrative centre to a new site (where he could do as he wished), instead of obtaining his requirements by force.

Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī (d. 1349) presents a different version: Sulaymān was very young when appointed governor of Filasṭīn in the days of his father 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān. Rajā' ibn Ḥaywa, a senior official in the Umayyad administration, served as his adjutant and personal adviser.⁹⁸ Sulaymān tried to acquire parcels of land in the centre of Lod but was foiled (so the chronicle goes) by an astute senior cleric. Furious at being baulked, Sulaymān wanted to execute that conniving Christian, but Rajā' managed to calm him, and took him for a ride outside Lod. Upon reaching a beautiful spot, said Rajā': "Consider building a monastery (dayr) for the Christians and a mosque for the Muslims on this spot, and tell people that whosoever builds his house here will enjoy your protection. Thus will you build a town in a site better than that of Lod." At the place indicated to him by Rajā', Sulaymān built the new city, namely al-Ramla. The special contribution of this tradition lies in stressing Rajā' ibn Ḥaywa's contribution and in placing the foundation in the days of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān's rule.⁹⁹ It should be kept in mind that the different traditions purporting to describe al-Ramla's foundation are late, retrospective attempts at explaining an existing situation.

According to the sources, the motivation for the foundation of al-Ramla contained strong elements of prestige and revenge. They stress Sulaymān's ambition and not considerations such as improving the population's lot. The creation of a provincial administrative centre, were it among Sulaymān's motives, was not even hinted at. Ought one to believe that Sulaymān founded a new town only because he or an official of his was denied a prime site in Lod?¹⁰⁰

Al-Ramla and Jerusalem

The inception of al-Ramla was the last stage in the Umayyads' misgivings about where to locate the provincial capital. Notwithstanding the rise in the importance of Jerusalem, evidenced in the urban landscape, we have not one text to prove that it served as the capital at that time. Sulaymān settled his capital on the coastal plain; the building of al-Ramla took place at the same time but independently of many Umayyad public works in Jerusalem, some of them instigated by Sulaymān himself (public baths, for instance). Thus it is

⁹⁷ Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, ii, p. 818. This information reached us only through Yāqūt and is not found in al-Muqaddasī's chronicle.

⁹⁸ C. E. Bosworth, "Rajā' ibn Ḥaywa al-Kindy and the Umayyad Caliphs", *Islamic Quarterly*, XVI, 3–4 (1972), pp. 36–80.

⁹⁹ Rajā' ibn Ḥaywa was one of the two appointed by 'Abd al-Malik to supervise the building of the Dome of the Rock.

¹⁰⁰ These speculations are discussed in R. Eisener, *Zwischen Faktum und Fiktion* (Wiesbaden, 1987), pp. 19–22.

reasonable to assume he did not see his enterprise at al-Ramla as contrary to the improvements in Jerusalem, or to its position. Moreover, such a far-reaching proposition as the building of a new town would not be undertaken without the Caliph's compliance. I intend to show below that he who selected al-Ramla as the capital took into account a complex of practical and geographical considerations, based on a sound understanding of the province. The foundation of al-Ramla did not diminish or contradict Jerusalem's religious position. Jerusalem was and remained down to our day the religious focus of the region and one of Islam's sacred centres.

The al-Ramla–Lod district – the optimal centre of gravity of the region

The Filastīn region, though a Muslim creation, continued in many aspects the Byzantine province, called Palestina Prima. The network of settlements and roads, as well as the other characteristics of the region, had crystallized before the Muslim conquest. The main change was the redrawing of the provincial borders and a different evaluation of the relative advantages of its districts. Thus the Muslims did not change the locations of the provincial centres, but only their relative importance. The wanderings of the provincial capital (located during the Byzantine era at Caesarea) in the seventh century show that in the first decades the Muslims had not decided where best to place their administrative centre. Parallel with the improvement of Jerusalem's position as a centre, the new masters conceived of the inner plain as a central district, and located there another focus. Lod and Jerusalem were, during the seventh century, the main options for possible capitals. Why did the final preference fall on the Lod district, specifically on al-Ramla? An answer, partial as it may be, is sought in the geographical characteristics of the region and in the determination of its natural centres of gravity. Below I will test the location of the two centres contemplated by the Umayyads in Filastīn. The relative centrality of the two centres in question will be compared in order to understand the geographical motivation of the Umayyads regarding the province of Filastīn. The exercise will highlight the decisive role played by relative centrality in the final choice of a capital. To this end, I will compare the distances from the important towns to the centres of gravity of the region, along the system of roads as it then was.

In Fig. 4 the relative (schematic) distances between Jerusalem and al-Ramla and the other towns are given. The exact distances were measured on the map of the road system at the time.¹⁰¹ The table of exact distances follows. The total distances to al-Ramla are some 25% lower than to Jerusalem, indicating that al-Ramla was nearer, more convenient as a regional hub, to most of the towns. Moreover, Jerusalem's position on a mountain ridge increased the required access time and limited the development of alternate routes. Inevitably it is easier to cross the same distance on the plain than in a hilly, region. To sum up, the al-Ramla district was more central, more accessible, from the towns which then existed.

Scanning the map of main routes (Fig. 5), one finds that the al-Ramla district also contained the principal crossroads where the chief longitudinal way (Damascus–al-Fuṣṭāt)

¹⁰¹ The distances were measured on a road map as presented in Welmsley, *The Administrative Structure*, map. no. 8.

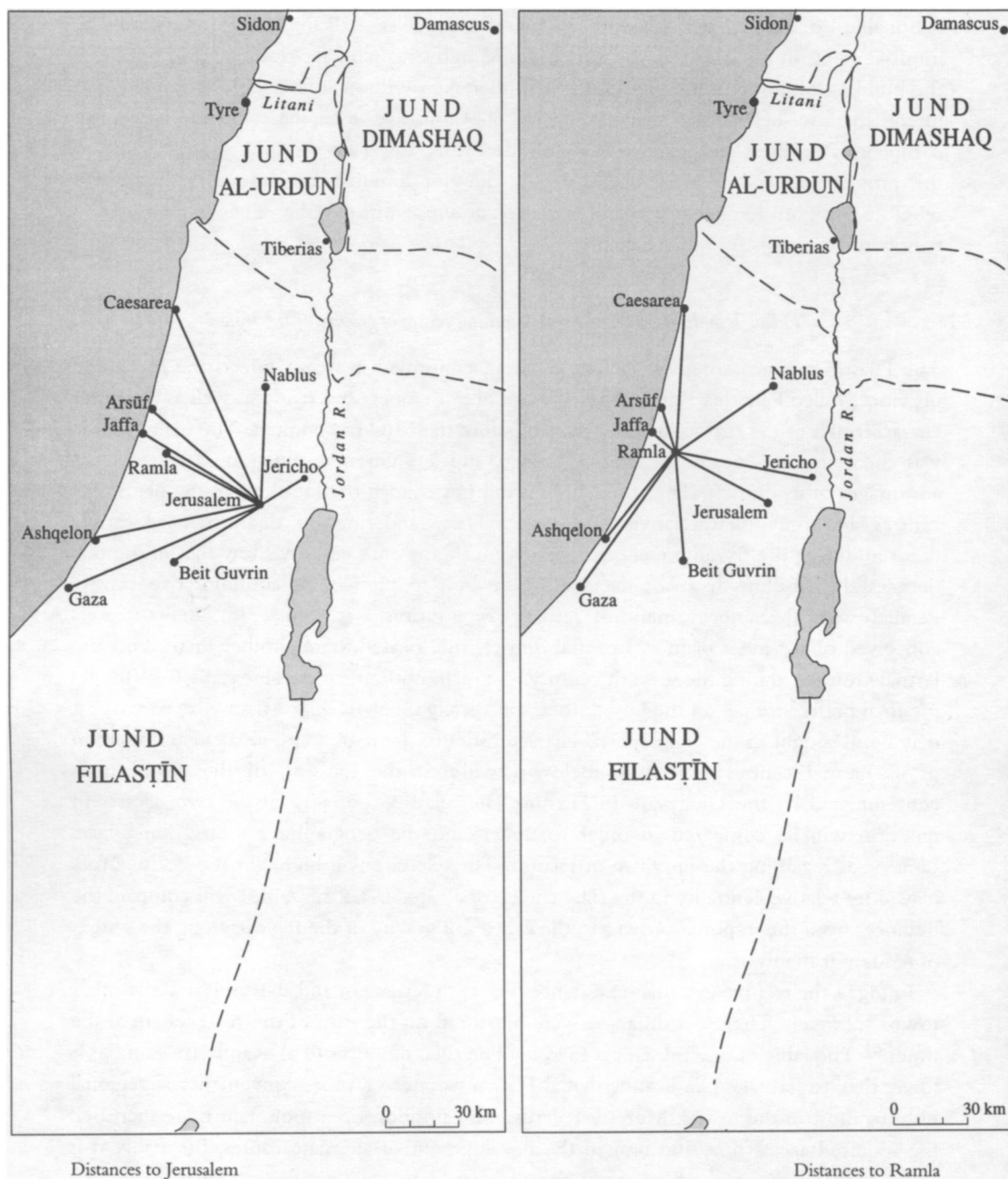


Figure 4. The urban centres of Jund Filastin at the beginning of the eighth century

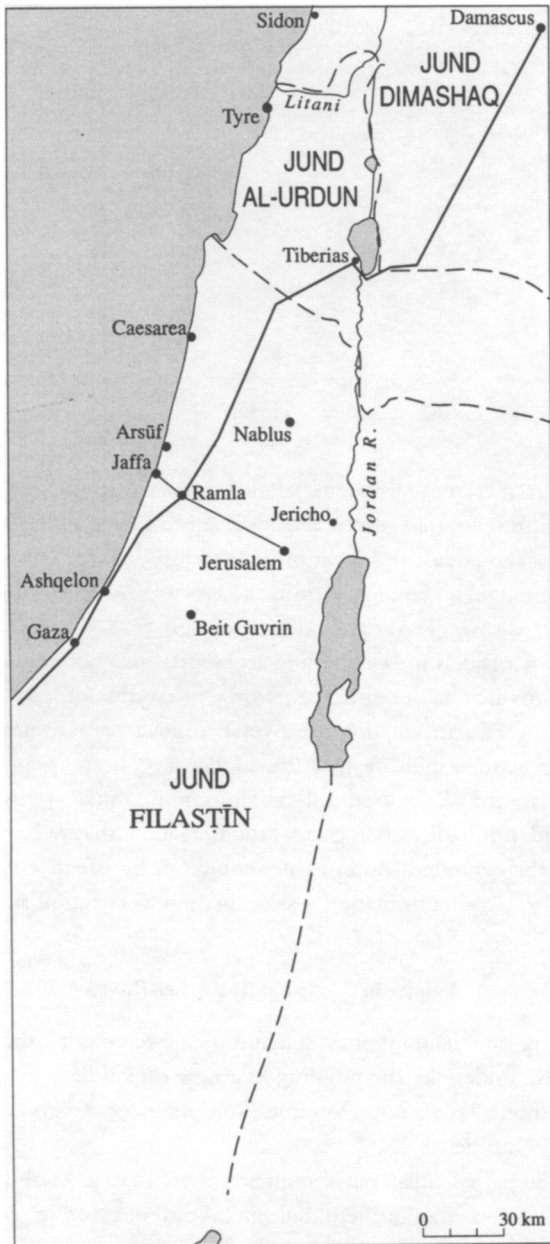


Figure 5. The main roads in the region

<i>Town</i>	<i>To al-Ramla</i>	<i>To Jerusalem</i>
Arsūf	39	88
Ashqelon	43	78
Beit-Govrin	34	38
Caesarea	75	113
Gaza	80	98
Jaffa	17	55
Jericho	73	35
Jerusalem	38	—
al-Ramla	—	38
Nabulus	90	81
Total	489 km.	624 km.

met the main transversal artery (Jerusalem–Jaffa). Thus al-Ramla lies on the most important roadway of the Muslim state, that connecting al-Shām to Egypt and Africa. For those ruling the whole area from Damascus, this location is therefore incomparably superior to one in the middle of a hilly range, 40 km. away from the crossing. Moreover, the transversal route lying across al-Ramla also was the best and easiest option.

Thus, the situation of al-Ramla regarding transportation, economic bonds, commerce and control of the province was enormously stronger than that of Jerusalem. It was the best both for the rulers of Filasṭīn and for the overall official communications (*barīd*) of the Muslim state. Their actions indicate that the Umayyads, at the beginning of the eighth century, realized that, for all its political–religious importance, Jerusalem’s geographical characteristics would not make it a good capital. The Umayyads understood that the province, as part of the extended Muslim state, could not be effectively controlled from the mountain. Al-Ramla’s excellent situation was decisive in its selection as capital.

Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik’s al-Ramla

After all the foregoing, the main question remains unanswered: why did the Umayyads, and specifically Sulaymān, undertake the building of a new capital hard by Lod, an existing and prosperous urban centre? To examine this question, one needs to go back to the reasons set forth by the Muslim chroniclers.

The Christians’ denial of Sulaymān’s request shows that in established cities the new rulers’ freedom of action was limited. Sulaymān did not try to confiscate land, after negotiations had failed; he went and built himself a new town in the neighbourhood. A similar development took place in Jerusalem after the Muslim conquest. In order to symbolize their dominion over the area, the Muslims did not take over the existing religious entity (e.g., by destroying the Church of the Holy Sepulchre), but built a sacred precinct on what was then abandoned property, namely, the Temple Mount.¹⁰²

¹⁰² The Temple Mount had been left unoccupied in Byzantine times because the Christians wanted to realize Jesus’s prophecy about its destruction. The situation is strikingly shown in the Madaba map, where the area is indicated by an empty square. See, M. Avi Yona, “The Madaba – translation and commentary”, *Eretz-Israel*, III

Al-Ṭabarī relates that when surrendering to the conquerors, towns such as Jerusalem and Lod received an *amān*, i.e. a writ safeguarding the population's property and religious buildings.¹⁰³ Such a commitment would at least formally prevent the confiscation of real estate from the residents. Therefore, if Ibn Bīṭrīq could be refused land for no more than a new home, it becomes clear why Sulaymān would not find enough space for a new administrative centre. The residents of Lod would cede the land most unwillingly and probably hamper him at every step.

In founding al-Ramla, Sulaymān made the best use of the excellent characteristics of the area, but away from Lod and possible delays and frictions. In any case it would be impossible to establish within Lod all the urban elements he planned with the same freedom he was given in al-Ramla. Thus the choice of a new, unimpeded area, allowed Sulaymān to fulfil his needs without the constraints of an established town.¹⁰⁴

Al-Jahshiyārī and Yāqūt pointed out another reason for founding a town: Sulaymān's quest for fame. As his ancestors had made great names for themselves by means of elaborate public works, so he chose the founding of a new capital for Filasṭīn as his way to immortality.

No complete understanding of the al-Ramla enterprise is possible without fully appreciating the historical personality responsible for selecting the site, planning the town and making it come true. As an urban creation, besides all the functions it came to perform, it must be seen as a "prince's town". All the practical considerations listed above led to the choice of the general area (situation) – but Sulaymān it was who determined the precise site and made it into a city. Above and beyond all other considerations, the foundation of al-Ramla was the physical expression of Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik's personal aspirations and ambitions. Al-Balādhurī relates that the first great edifice Sulaymān put up in al-Ramla was his own mansion; only after that did he build the mosque.¹⁰⁵ The governmental centre preceded the religious one. In the symbolic landscape Sulaymān defined for his city, he made sure of a clear hierarchy of values, where his palace took pride of place as the focal and fundamental building in the town. Above all the practical functions quoted above, al-Ramla was to be Sulaymān's town and as such it is historically perceived up to this day. Defining al-Ramla as a town created by a prince's decree does not necessarily reduce it to a personal whim of Sulaymān's. If that was all it was, it would have disappeared from the geographical map as soon as Sulaymān left the political scene. His decisions were undoubtedly coloured by personal reasons, but he was wise enough to fulfil practical needs.



In the early years of the eighth century, al-Ramla was founded as an original Muslim urban creation, to serve as capital of the province of Filasṭīn. The location of the new capital offered many advantages from the standpoint of both the provincial administration and the interests of the Muslim state. The plan was based on and derived from the Roman model, a

(Sefer Lif) (1963), pp. 7, 148. C. Mango, "The Temple Mount, A.D. 614–638", in J. Raby and J. Johns (eds.), *Bayt Al-Maqdis, 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, i (Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–16.

¹⁰³ On the *amān* of Jerusalem, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul*, i, pp. 2405–6.

¹⁰⁴ A similar consideration directed the different rulers of al-Fustāt and its princely quarters. On the urban evolution of al-Fustāt see J. L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo – 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (New Jersey, 1971), pp. 6–19.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, p. 143.

model clearly visible in a number of towns that the Umayyads encountered when they ruled the area. In analyzing the historical–geographical–urban role of al-Ramla, this paper has touched, among other aspects, on its economic strength and its uniqueness as a Muslim city. The latter was a function not only of the centrality of the White Mosque, but also of the multiple influences of its Muslim inhabitants and the Muslim government on the urban development. The town’s physical landscape, as well as the socio-cultural one, was Muslim. In the last sections, I have amply discussed the essential question of the rationale for founding a new capital. This was done from practical considerations and sited following a correct reading of the region’s geographical characteristics. At the same time, we cannot fully encompass the process that resulted in the building of al-Ramla without understanding the dominant personality of Sulaymān b. ‘Abd al-Malik, who chose this means to impress his personal stamp on the landscape of Palestine.