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BETHLEHEM: THE OLD TOWN FROM STAR STREET

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Out of the city organized around the Grotto of the Nativity, venerated, it seems, since year 160 AD, there remained in the 16th century on the Bethlehem site a town consolidated into separate parts around the Constantinian Basilica of the 4th century. Left behind were diverse episodes of destruction and subsequent rebuilding carried out during the intervening centuries as a result of the far from peaceful history staged time and time again in this city. And the stability provided by Ottoman domination since the 16th century developed into a city without a unitary precinct which, together with the Basilical complex - itself becoming a fortress - gave rise to two urban formations with their own identity: the one set up around the Anatreh *hara*, south of the Basilica, and the one formed by the Nadjareh and Tarajmeh *hara*, west of the Basilica, beyond a small intermediate space.¹ These *hara* were compact groups of building where residents gathered originally around a patriarchal family as a clan, which progressively expanded on themselves. This development was based on the respect towards the rules of enclosures and dividing walls that defended family life within the courtyards (*hosh*) adopting the aspect of an almost continuous compact and intricate construction.

The special features in the composition and building of a traditional Palestinian house in a medium provided with high quality limestone brought about a particular definition of the buildings themselves and the whole complex. Out of this the *hara*'s formal identity was derived and characterized by defined edges or limited by streets, which acted as main thoroughfares.

Here the traditional house² tended to be organized in superimposed levels, taking advantage of the usual presence of uneven ground, in such a way that the dwelling space itself was set upon the stable by making superb groin vaulting of clear beautiful limestone. Onto this basic cell a new superimposed one would eventually be added to store the harvest or as an extension to the house, or an additional cell could be built at the same level. This construction process gave rise to buildings where the regularity in the basic construction of the regular dome marked the predominant order to which other elements, such as the stairs between levels or the dimension and position of openings, were subordinated.

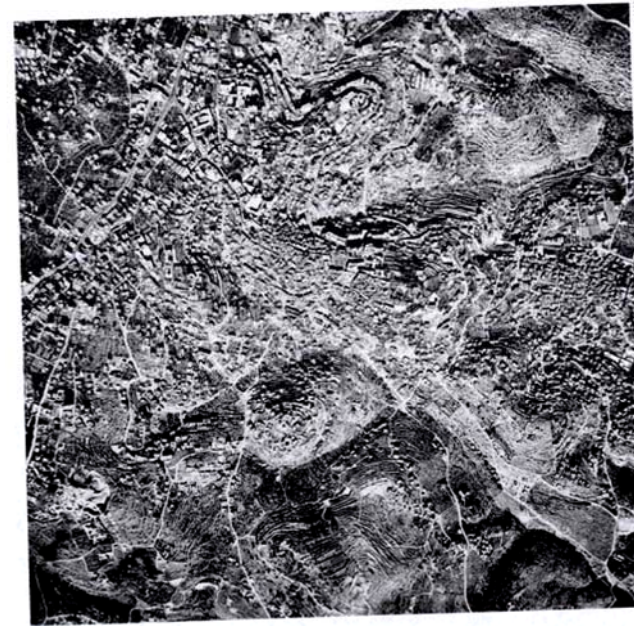


Fig. 1
Bethlehem view, by David
Roberts (c. 1840)

¹ There follow descriptions used in specialized studies on the city, such as: Petrosi, M.T., *Betlemme*, Jerusalem, Tip. dei PP. Francescani, 1971; Revault, C., Santelli, S., Weil-Rochant, C., *Maisons de Bethléem*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, Institut du Monde Arabe, 1997.

² Related to the house from other nearby Islamic countries, as is shown in Ragette, F., *Architecture in Lebanon*, Delmar, N.Y., Caravan, 1980.

Fig. 2
City of Bethlehem,
30-12-1997



The period of opening up, which started in the mid-19th century with European missionaries being allowed to settle in the Holy Land, was accompanied by city expansion, which slowly started taking on a new magnitude, although maintaining the constitution of the old *haras*. Continuity was also present in the construction methods, which extended well into the 20th century, even though the private building type was enhanced by different variants and even integrated compositional and stylistic influences coming from Europe.

In this most recent urban growth, the unique role played by the city as a reference encouraged the settlement of many Christian religious orders establishing quarters in the city, not without a relevant intention, which gave rise to an urban composition as unique as the one Bethlehem has these days. Around the Christian monuments erected on the Grotto of the Nativity, an intense Islamic city is developing, with diminishing concentration as it moves away from the Nativity, and dotted with the notable presence of the buildings of countless religious orders, a feature of which, besides size, are their towers and spires crowned with the cross sign. The rugged ground on which the city is built also characterizes this urban scene. On the steep slopes descending into the Valley of Shepherds there stands out a somewhat prominent reference with the Nativity Hill. It is perhaps due to these geographical conditions that access from the nearby Jerusalem - only 9 kilometres to the north - had a permanent influence on the city shape.

This link, running along the mountainside, was the preferred route in order to provide a more comfortable access to the Nativity Hill and as a historical access to Bethlehem; it was subsequently named Star Street. Many travellers arriving at such a prominent site bore witness to these surroundings in images that, with different degrees of realism, usually show the vantage point of such renowned enclave, with the mountain slopes cut through by Star Street in the foreground. To reach the Nativity, or Manger Square - the public square facing the complex -, Star Street played in its innermost stretch a demarcating role between the two historic

hara as they evolved under Ottoman domination: the Tarajmeh *hara* in the NE, and the Hrezat *hara* in the SW. The permanence of its street line served as a reference for the evolution of these growing agglomerations on the slopes. Both expanding *hara*'s had however a common detail in the building with a gateway on to the street. It bore witness to a certain past when the city enclosure had fixed points of access. The cluster of buildings on this stretch presents some archaic houses bordering the street but not opening onto it, being serviced instead by tributary paths or steps serving courtyards and secondary paths belonging to the innermost traditions of each *hara*. There are also houses opening on to the street, belonging to a more recent time and with a more prominent architectural construction. The case of the Gurkis house, of late Ottoman origin, is one of the major examples, with its group of vaulted cells around the *hosh*, but taking advantage of its main body elevated over the street in order to have better views of the valley below. There are other examples, such as the Cardinal House (in ruins), or Koas el Zarrara with its elevated tower over the street and its spacious vaulted square hall. These buildings have access from inside the *hara*, but display their effects towards the street. Likewise, there are more recent

Fig. 3
Star Street Area in the
Bethlehem urban scene



houses such as the Richard Mansur house, which, by means of traditional building resources and the will to open up a view of the valley, shows a more conventional position over the street and a European-style language.

The richness of the limestone masonry is outstanding in all cases, even in the houses that, quite in a natural manner, have remained unfinished for a long time. The solidity of the vaulting is such that its completion could remain pending for decades. In its second stretch Star Street accommodated at its edges developments where there were already present Christian religious institutions; therefore it can be deduced that from 1860 onwards the area experienced a remarkable increase in occupation. But beside the Saint Joseph School, the installations of the Greek-Catholic Church, the vast flight of steps running towards the Salesian Orphanage or the old Italian Monastery, there is a group of remarkable houses which occupy plots of land of less restricted dimensions.

The houses in question are Georges Malki-Abu Araj, Nader Alsaka and Georges Salama, built on the street line, and the Issa Kattan house, on the mountainside. These are houses following a building type with certain common features. The basic unit remains the square groin-vaulted cell with its ability to expansion on superimposed levels. But now it is the juxtaposed association of these cells that becomes protagonist on clustering themselves around a quadrangular inner patio or *liwan* opening onto the valley and actually orienting the whole functioning of the house. The *liwan* can be very spacious, and thus become some sort of courtyard opening onto the valley, therefore facing N-NE. The house does not change its typical configuration according to the side of the street, which means that houses descending the slope have their backs to the street, whereas those built ascending the slope show their most outstanding and unique façade towards the valley, precisely at street level. It seems thus that the house takes on a nice «European style» position over the street, but actually it is offering the image of its shape to the valley.

On the next stretch of the street until the junction with Salesians Street, there is a rather uniform continuum of constructions built or renewed by techniques still traditional during the 19th century, on which the parts added during the 20th century involve sometimes-exaggerated distortions. Nevertheless, amongst the dominance of 19th century types there are still exceptional houses bearing witness to past times and illustrating a previous occupation of these fields which once laid outside the city walls.

At the street line down the slope we have the Louisse house and the adjacent house to the south. Both are outstanding. The latter, dating from 1637, opens towards the valley remarkably below street level, and it consists of only two adjacent vaulted cells sharing a small external space. This would represent an early stage of farmhouse built at the side of the road leading to the city, but backing on to it, almost acting as a buttress for the road. Beside it stands the Louisse house, maybe dating from the 18th century, still keeping its original configuration, a result of the combination of two vaulted cells, independent of but close to each other, extended at superimposed levels as vaulted towers sharing a small intermediate space used as a *hosh* into which the communication stairs and the access to the house from a side-path of Star Street run.

But along this third stretch of the street the presence of somewhat different houses becomes dominant. Built on big plots, they offer a mixed solution of a house open to the courtyard oriented towards the valley and at the same time opening towards Star Street by a series of apertures of the same size. In these houses the function of the street as a place for commerce is already present in an explicit and organized way. The fourth and last stretch of Star Street, between Salesians Street and King David, is characterized by the big size of the plots sharing the street length - particularly down the slope - and the bigger dimensions of the buildings. Also in this case, among the buildings lining the street, most dating from the 19th century and later, one can find some remaining from previous times. This is the case of the building located between the Jabreah and Al Dabdoub houses, on the descending slope. This construction

Fig. 4
Star Street. Built level on the
street & up and down the
slope. Martín & Peropadre,
archs



consists of two regular vaulted cells separated by a small *hosh*. With access from one of the lateral series of steps, the house appears opaque towards the street, and at a lower level than that of the street, as if it had been an old rural building transformed into an urban dwelling during the 19th century. But together with this special feature, what stands out here are big houses like Al Dabdoub, Jabreah or Miguel, which are organized, with ample dimensions, by combining vaulted cells juxtaposed around a gallery opening onto all the valley views offered by the spot, the mountainside being so steep. These big buildings contribute to the commercial nature of the street, but they give preference to their unitary architectural composition towards the open landscape. On the other side of the street, houses show an almost continuous succession of premises characterized by the regularity of the juxtaposed vaulted cells in each plot, on top of which rise buildings drawn back on the mountainside level or on the first line of houses on the street. The Sabella house, from the first half of the 20th century, lying at the junction with Salesians Street, is a remarkable example of this type.

This peculiar configuration of Star Street, resulting from different periods in the shaping of the city, reveals at the end of this brief itinerary the obvious richness of a very peculiar urban outline, a sample of the Old Town at Bethlehem. These values are to a large extent a consequence of the survival of the construction technique used for the buildings and of the persistent originality in the methods of architectural composition.

It was particularly the significant urban development heritage of Star Street and its surroundings, with its important potential for growth, that suffered a major alteration in its functional sense when Manger Street was built in 1926. This was a fast way running a few meters down the slope, which allowed direct access to Manger Square and the Nativity Church without having to follow the historical route along Star Street, freeing the latter from the growing traffic with which it could not cope.

Just like in so many other cities experiencing the effect of similar moves, a new field was thus opened for the urban development of the city around the new street, but other possibilities, which at the time were taking shape in Star Street and its environment, were abandoned.

The imbalance increased with the passage of time and the successive events. Houses being abandoned by their owners, fleeing into exile, the suburbanization of space or the reduced impact of tourism, focused on peace periods and only on the Nativity, are some of the less favourable circumstances affecting this historic area.

The «Bethlehem 2000» events organized by the NPA tried to lay the foundations for the beginning of a new era. There, Spanish cooperation was materialized in several actions, one of which was the urban planning for the restoration of one part of the Old Town built around Star Street.

Our proposal stressed different points, amongst which the most important was, within

Fig. 5
Star Street Area. General
planning, Martín &
Peropadre, archs



a general overview, a certain reorganization of the functioning of the city, in order that the eventual - hoped for at the time - return of thousands of refugees and the normalization of the potential of the city for tourism might take place in a city that discovers, together with the Nativity site, a splendid heritage of urban development. Therefore the urban planning action was based on a functional restructuring. It would allow the recuperation of the logic sense for main pedestrian routes in Star Street and its surroundings by recovering stimulating longitudinal routes for pilgrims and tourists and by improving transverse access for the public. Together with this, the revitalization of the area was based on a growth of the usage density, making easier to increase the possibilities of buildings while preserving the qualities of both the architectural heritage and the urban whole. To that end, the types of intervention were regulated according to the specifications of each building, paying attention to the singularities of the architecture within the overall morphological context. This restoration of appropriate urban conditions was also extended to reserve some minimum free public spaces and parking space, in order to avoid the invasion by cars parking on public thoroughfare, which should be protected. Star Street becomes thus a privileged observatory to assess the possibilities of and deal with rescuing the Old Town in Bethlehem, this being the site not only of a historical basilica but a rich and valuable city, the heritage of a civilization.