

## THE HISTORY OF THE SYRIAN CITY OF MANBIJ FROM THE ISLAMIC CONQUEST TO THE OTTOMAN CONQUEST

### A HISTÓRIA DA CIDADE SÍRIA DE MANBIJ, DA CONQUISTA ISLÂMICA À CONQUISTA OTOMANA

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**Abdullah Şeyhoğlu\***

\*Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey, Mardin

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6054-4331>

[abdallah.sh1985@gmail.com](mailto:abdallah.sh1985@gmail.com)

**Metin Şerifoğlu\*\***

\*\*Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey, Mardin

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5828-2157>

[metinserifoglu@artuklu.edu.tr](mailto:metinserifoglu@artuklu.edu.tr)

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#### Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the history of the city of Manbij, located in the northeastern part of Aleppo Governorate on the banks of the Euphrates River, which has served across the ages as a prominent cultural, religious, and economic center. The research traces the city's origins to the Hittite period in the second millennium BCE, highlighting the multiplicity of its names and their transformations under successive ruling powers, as well as its distinctive geographical position that rendered it a strategic hub for trade, agriculture, and military defense. The study further emphasizes Manbij's religious significance as a sacred city in antiquity, and its military role following the Islamic conquest, when it became one of the most important frontier fortresses of the Islamic state. It also explores the city's status under the rule of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids, with particular attention to the architectural and administrative flourishing of the early Abbasid era and the political instability of the later Abbasid period. Moreover, the research examines the incorporation of Manbij into the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in administrative reorganization and remarkable social diversity that fostered a model of coexistence among various ethnic groups. The study concludes that Manbij has historically represented a unique paradigm of cultural, religious, and economic interaction, despite the challenges and conflicts it has faced.

#### Resumo

*Este estudo oferece um exame abrangente da história da cidade de Manbij, localizada na parte nordeste da província de Aleppo, às margens do rio Eufrates, que serviu ao longo dos séculos como um importante centro cultural, religioso e econômico. A pesquisa traça as origens da cidade até o período hitita, no segundo milênio a.C., destacando a multiplicidade de seus nomes e suas transformações sob sucessivos poderes governantes, bem como sua posição geográfica singular que a tornou um centro estratégico para o comércio, a agricultura e a defesa militar. O estudo enfatiza ainda a importância religiosa de Manbij como cidade sagrada na antiguidade e seu papel militar após a conquista islâmica, quando se tornou uma das fortalezas fronteiriças mais importantes do estado islâmico. Explora também o status da cidade sob o domínio dos califas bem-guiados, dos omíadas e dos abássidas, com atenção especial ao florescimento arquitetônico e administrativo do início da era abássida e à instabilidade política do período abássida posterior. Além disso, a pesquisa examina a incorporação de Manbij ao Império Otomano, que resultou em reorganização administrativa e notável diversidade social, fomentando um modelo de coexistência entre vários grupos étnicos. O estudo conclui que Manbij representou historicamente um paradigma único de interação cultural, religiosa e econômica, apesar dos desafios e conflitos que enfrentou.*



**Keywords:** Abbasid Caliphate. Manbij. Ottoman Caliphate. Umayyad Caliphate.

**Palavras-chave:** *Califado Abássida. Manbij. Califado Otomano. Califado Omíada.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Manbij, the city lying on the banks of the Euphrates River, has witnessed some of the earliest human civilizations and endured numerous wars that nearly destroyed it completely. Despite these challenges, it has remained one of the most important Syrian cities due to its strategic geographical location and abundant resources. Manbij is considered the economic reservoir of Aleppo Governorate because of its vast agricultural lands. It is also renowned as a city of poetry and poets, with many distinguished poets belonging to it across different historical periods.

Manbij is administratively affiliated with Aleppo Governorate in Syria. It lies approximately 80 kilometers away from Aleppo, only a few kilometers from the Euphrates River, and about 40 kilometers from the Turkish–Syrian border. The city is situated at an elevation of nearly 475 meters above sea level.

Since ancient times, the city has been inhabited by a distinctive social mix characterized by strong communal ties, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, Circassians, and other remaining ethnic groups. Administratively, it encompasses several sub-districts and villages, among the most notable of which are Khafsah, Abu Qalqal, and Maskanah. According to the 2004 census, the population of the city exceeds 400,000 inhabitants.

Regarding the founding history of the city of Manbij, most historical sources indicate that it was established in the second millennium BCE by the Hittites, who controlled the northern regions of Syria. Subsequently, successive civilizations rose and fell in the area, with each new civilization emerging as its predecessor declined.

Manbij has held particular religious importance since ancient times. During the Roman era, it was called Hierapolis, meaning “the sacred city.” The city contained numerous temples, which drew many people of that period to attend festivals and religious celebrations.

## 2 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE CITY OF MANBIJ

In the historical sources available to us, no detailed account of the founding of Manbij has been found. However, most references indicate that the city was established in the second century BCE during the era of the Hittites, who ruled the region between 1600 and 1178 BCE. Manbij is considered a Hittite city, and its current name is derived from the word “Maboug,” which was used to designate the city since ancient times. When the Assyrians reached the region, they attempted to change its name to “Lita Ashur,” but their efforts were unsuccessful. Due to its religious significance, Manbij later became known as the sacred city and served as the sole religious capital of the Arameans, who built within it the temple of the storm god along with other sanctuaries. (Hamida, 1992)

If the founding of the city is linked to its religious significance, we discover that Manbij was established during the Hittite era. The Hittites built temples dedicated to the deities they worshipped and revered. Among the most important of these deities was the Great Goddess (Astarte). The temple whose ruins can still be seen in Manbij was specifically devoted to the worship of this Great Goddess. (al-Dibs, 1994)

Thus, we conclude that the city of Manbij was founded during the Hittite era and subsequently witnessed most of the civilizations that ruled the city of Aleppo.

## 3 THE NAMES ATTRIBUTED TO THE CITY OF MANBIJ

The current name of the city is Manbij. (al-Hamawi, 1995) One account attributes the name to nabij, a type of food that Arabs prepared during times of famine. (al-Hamawi, 1995) A second narrative links the name to the anbuju tree, which was said to have been widely cultivated in the city. (Murtada, 2001) However, this interpretation is unlikely, as the anbuju is a tropical tree and the climate of Manbij is far removed from tropical conditions. A third explanation suggests that the name Manbij is of Syriac origin, derived from Manbagh, meaning “spring,” in reference to the great water source located in the city. (al-Ghazi, 1419 AH) The third account is considered the most plausible explanation for the city’s name.

Throughout history, the city of Manbij has been known by many names. It was once called Syrias, later changed to Aproclis. When Khosrow reached the city, he named it Manbah. (Ibn-alAdim) During the Assyrian era, it became known as Nambiji, meaning

“spring.” In the Seleucid Greek period, the city was named Hierapolis, or “the sacred city,” (Hamida, 1992) reflecting its significant religious status. In the Abbasid era, Caliph Harun al-Rashid referred to it as the “Capital of Capitals,” which included Duluk, Ra‘ban, Qurus, and Antioch, considering it one of the most important frontier fortresses of the Muslim lands against external aggressions, particularly Roman incursions. (Atwan, 1987)

Thus, we observe that the name of the city has changed several times throughout history, depending on the ruling power and the language in use. Each renaming sought to alter everything connected to the city’s origin and heritage, aiming to detach it from its past and cultural legacy.

#### **4 THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CITY OF MANBIJ**

Manbij is located in the northeastern part of Aleppo, approximately 80 kilometers away, and today it is administratively affiliated with it. The city lies only a few kilometers from the famous Euphrates River and is situated at an elevation of about 475 meters above sea level. Its terrain is relatively flat, sloping toward the Euphrates River and the Sajur in the north, while in the south it descends toward the Abu Qalqal district. (Hamida, 1992) In present times, the city is separated from the Turkish border by only 40 kilometers (al-Hamawi, 1995).

The city is also situated along one of the most important trade routes, as since ancient times it has connected Aleppo with Urfa, near the Sajur River that flows through the city. (Ibn-alAdim)

The land on which Manbij is situated is fertile, lying along the road that connects Aleppo with Jarabulus. (ibn-Hawqal, 1938) To understand its geographical location more precisely, it is necessary to consider the distances separating it from neighboring areas: from Manbij to Marash is a two-day journey, from Manbij to Aleppo is about ten miles, and to Baza‘ah approximately two miles. (al-Idrisi, 1409 AH)

The city was founded in a region of fertile plains, with rich soil that facilitated the cultivation of cotton. Owing to its strategic location, it became a stage for some of the most significant historical events. Manbij is a large city, located only a short distance from the Euphrates River. It contains two massive walls that were constructed during the Roman era. The city is also associated with the Manbij Bridge over the Euphrates, which

once stood at its boundary near the town of Sinjah, known as the Sinjah Arch. (al-Idrisi, 1409 AH)

Since the city overlooks all the passages across the Euphrates River, it came to constitute an important geographical frontier between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic state.

## **5 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CITY OF MANBIJ**

Since its founding, the city of Manbij has enjoyed great importance in all respects. Religiously, before the advent of Islam, the city served as a major center for temples and sanctuaries, which in turn attracted pagans to hold their religious festivals there. During the Aramean period, Manbij was the religious capital, where they built their most significant temples, including the temple of Hadad, their storm god, (al-Fayoumi, 1427 AH) and Atargatis, the goddess of water. (Hamida, 1992)

The religious importance of the city was further consolidated when the Hittites transferred the temple of Astarte—one of their most significant religious sanctuaries—from the city of Jarabulus to Manbij. (al-Dibs, 1994)

Continuing our journey through the corridors of history, we encounter the military significance of Manbij. The city served as one of the most important bases of the Roman army for launching raids into Mesopotamia and Persia. A clear testament to its military importance is the formidable Byzantine walls that were erected in the city, some of which remain standing to this day. (Hamida, 1992) Cities lacking strategic value were not fortified, whereas walls and defenses were constructed around those of strategic importance, such as Manbij.

After the Islamic conquest of Manbij, the city continued to maintain its military importance, serving as one of the most significant frontier fortresses safeguarding the borders of the Islamic state. When Caliph Harun al-Rashid visited the city and observed the strategic value of its location, he named it the “Capital of Capitals.” (Al-Baladhuri, 1988) Most of the Islamic military campaigns directed against Byzantine territories passed through Manbij; indeed, the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun passed through the city in 215 AH / 830 CE during his expedition against the Byzantines. (Hamida, 1992)

As for the economic importance of Manbij, the city has long enjoyed great significance, making it a target for ambitious powers throughout history. It provided

economic self-sufficiency for its inhabitants and neighboring regions, as it was abundant in agricultural produce. The city contained numerous farms, and its fruits and vegetables were of exceptional quality. Manbij was also renowned for cultivating mulberry trees and raising silkworms before the earthquake that struck it in 744AH. (al-Ghazi, 1419 AH)

The city became renowned for cotton cultivation, encouraged by its fertile soil. However, this led to an irrational expansion of cotton farming, which in turn caused the depletion of the city's water resources. Rainfall could not compensate for this loss, and the city began to suffer from drought after once being rich in groundwater due to its proximity to the Euphrates River. (Hamida, 1992)

Ibn Jubayr delves into the depths of history to describe the economic condition of Manbij. He notes that it is a spacious town with healthy air, surrounded by orchards dense with trees and diverse fruits. God endowed it with wells of remarkable sweetness and refreshing taste. Its land is generous, yielding abundant water. The markets and streets are wide and expansive, while its shops and stores resemble large khans and warehouses in their spaciousness. The markets themselves are roofed. (Ibn-Jubayr)

Similarly, the city contained large numbers of sheep, goats, and camels. Manbij also held significant commercial importance, as it was home to numerous markets, some of which still exist today. Among these was the livestock market, known locally as the "Bazaar al-Mashiyah," which lasted for three consecutive days—unlike the usual practice in other cities. Sunday was dedicated to the market for mules and horses, Monday for goats and sheep, and Tuesday for camels and cattle. In addition, the city hosted many other markets that sought to meet the needs of its residents and visitors from surrounding regions, who came with confidence that all their requirements would be available. Manbij also exported its agricultural and industrial products to many other cities. (Hamida, 1992)

Thus, we see the great importance that the city enjoyed throughout different stages of history—whether religious, military, or economic. Unfortunately, in our present era, the city has lost this distinction and significance due to poor administration, neglect, and the inability to benefit from its location and resources. A clear indication of this decline is that many of its villages are labeled as "remote areas," meaning poor and underdeveloped. Moreover, any teacher appointed to work in one of its schools receives a 10% increase in salary, classified as compensation for serving in remote areas.

## 6 THE CONQUEST OF THE CITY OF MANBIJ

At the beginning of the Islamic conquests, which spread across the East and West, Manbij was under Byzantine rule. Bilad al-Sham became one of the regions affected by these conquests due to its strategic location, its proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, and the suffering of its inhabitants under prevailing oppression. The Islamic army advanced and defeated the Byzantines in the Battle of Yarmouk in 15AH. This battle is considered one of the most significant in Islamic history, as it dispelled the fear that the Byzantine army was invincible, determined the fate of Bilad al-Sham for centuries to come, opened the door to subsequent victories in the region, and simultaneously ended Byzantine hopes of reclaiming Bilad al-Sham from Muslim control. (Taqqush, 2003)

After the victory at the Battle of Yarmouk, the Islamic army advanced toward Aleppo under the command of the noble Companion Abu ‘Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah. Upon reaching the outskirts of the city, the Muslim forces laid siege to it. During the siege, a large portion of the inhabitants embraced Islam. The siege continued until the people requested peace and security for themselves, their city, and their children. Their request was granted, the city was opened and secured, and the Muslims faithfully upheld the covenants and agreements they had made with the residents. (Ibn-alAthir, 1997)

Abu ‘Ubaydah was now within reach of the borders of Manbij, eager to conquer this strategically important city. After consulting with the commanders of the Islamic army, he appointed ‘Iyad ibn Ghanm to lead the campaign against Manbij. Upon his arrival in the city in 15AH, its inhabitants requested peace and security, just as the people of Aleppo had done. The agreement was concluded under the same terms as those of Aleppo and Antioch. ‘Iyad also asked the people of the city to inform him of all details concerning the Byzantines. (al-Ghazi, 1419 AH)

Thus, the armies of the Islamic conquest were able to enter the city of Manbij without any resistance from its inhabitants or from the Byzantine army. This serves as clear evidence of the people’s discontent with the Byzantines and their unethical treatment of the population, as well as the inhabitants’ desire to change the prevailing situation. Their willingness was further strengthened by the reports they had heard about the tolerance of the new Islamic faith, which was spreading rapidly across the world, and about the way the Muslim armies treated the populations of the conquered regions. They did not commit crimes, massacres, or forced displacements; they did not destroy places

of worship or violate honor. On the contrary, they adhered to the covenants they had made with the local populations and did not compel them to embrace Islam. This unique model, unprecedented in the city's history, inspired the inhabitants to willingly embrace this noble religion.

## **7 MANBIJ UNDER THE RULE OF THE RIGHTLY GUIDED CALIPHS AND THE Umayyad Caliphate**

The Muslims succeeded in defeating the Byzantines in Bilad al-Sham during the reign of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. The first task undertaken by the Muslims after completing the conquest was to organize the affairs of the city in all domains, in order to make it resemble the system of the Islamic state established in Medina, which was evolving day by day in accordance with the developments taking place in the world at that time.

During the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, the city of Manbij continued to play its well-known historical role as a principal launching point for Islamic armies and as one of the important frontier fortresses of the Muslims. It became the base upon which the Muslims relied to mobilize their forces against the Byzantines and the enemies of Islam, due to its proximity to their territories. This strategic location made the city constantly exposed to Byzantine raids, as they sought to reclaim it and recover the nearby towns from Muslim control. Muslim commanders were fully aware of this vulnerability, which prompted them to fortify the city in a manner that would prevent the Byzantines from seizing it at any cost. Consequently, Manbij became a major gathering point for the most significant Islamic forces, and its troops were frequently called upon whenever the threat of war arose or when campaigns were launched against Byzantine cities targeted for conquest. (Hamida, 1992)

With the end of the era of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and the emergence of the Islamic caliphates, beginning with the Umayyad Caliphate, the city of Manbij continued to maintain its importance and strategic role, particularly in the military sphere. The Umayyad caliphs devoted considerable attention to this city, recognizing its significant role in safeguarding the frontiers of the Islamic state. (Ibn-alAthir, 1997)

Due to the great importance of the city of Manbij, Caliph Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan placed it under the jurisdiction of Qinnasrin. Thus, (al-Baghdadi., 1981) Manbij

became one of the military districts (ajnad) of Bilad al-Sham, as the Islamic territories were divided into military provinces, each headed by a commander with long-standing expertise in military affairs. (Taqqush, 2003)

As the Umayyad Caliphate approached its decline, specifically during the Battle of al-Zab in 132AH between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, the Abbasid army triumphed over the Umayyad forces. Following this battle, the Umayyad Caliphate in the East was permanently abolished, and the Abbasid Caliphate began its rule. The Umayyad Caliph Marwan ibn Muhammad departed from Mosul, crossing the Euphrates River via the bridge of Manbij, which he set ablaze to prevent ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Ali from using it should he attempt to pursue him. Nevertheless, ‘Abd Allah managed to follow and reached the city of Manbij. Upon his arrival, the people of Aleppo pledged allegiance to him, realizing that once he seized Manbij from the Umayyads, Aleppo would inevitably become his next target. Consequently, Marwan ibn Muhammad proceeded toward Qinnasrin. (al-Razi, 2002)

Thus, from the very first moments of its conquest, the city of Manbij received considerable attention from caliphs and rulers, as they recognized its great importance in confronting potential threats that might arise from that direction due to the Byzantines’ vigilance and their anticipation of any lapse on the part of the Muslims along this frontier and other border fortresses, in order to launch an assault on Bilad al-Sham and reclaim it from Muslim control.

## **8 MANBIJ UNDER THE ABBASID CALIPHATE (EARLY ABBASID PERIOD)**

After the Abbasid army defeated the Umayyad forces in the Battle of al-Zab in 132AH, the era of the Umayyad Caliphate in the East came to a definitive end, ushering in the rule of the Abbasid Caliphate. As is customary in the history of states, one of the most significant measures to be taken was the relocation of the capital. Thus, after Damascus had served as the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate, Kufa—and subsequently Baghdad—became the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. Inevitably, the cities of Bilad al-Sham were affected by this shift, as the focus of the Abbasid state turned toward its new capital, while attention to Damascus and its dependencies diminished somewhat. However, the city of Manbij was not affected in the same way as other Syrian cities. This was due to its role as the principal defensive flank of the Abbasid Caliphate against the

Byzantine Romans. The Abbasid caliphs realized the necessity of continuing to devote attention to this small city, to the extent that some of them personally visited it and instructed its governors to safeguard it. (al-Idrisi, 1409 AH)

Caliph Harun al-Rashid appointed ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Salih as governor of Aleppo and Qinnasrin, to which the city of Manbij had previously been subordinate. Harun then introduced structural reforms to the administrative system, separating Manbij from Qinnasrin. ‘Abd al-Malik chose to establish his residence in Manbij, (Al-Tabari, 1387 AH) fully aware of its strategic importance. He built his palace on the outskirts of the city and began constructing large and formidable edifices along its frontiers. These fortifications became the primary bases for launching the summer campaigns (al-sa’ifa). Thus, Manbij came to constitute the first line of contact with the Byzantine enemy, which prompted the Muslims to prepare it militarily so that it could serve as a stronghold for the mujahidin arriving from across the Islamic territories to defend the prestige of the Islamic state. (Al-Baladhuri, 1988)

When Caliph Harun al-Rashid decided to visit the city of Aleppo to inspect its conditions, he proceeded to the city of Manbij—another indication of the importance he attached to it—where he resided in the palace of ‘Abd al-Malik. After his death, Harun al-Rashid entrusted the administration of the city first to Musa ibn ‘Isa, then to Ja‘far ibn Yahya, and subsequently to Isma‘il ibn Salih. (Ibn-alAdim)

Indeed, this rotation of governors in the city is sufficient evidence of the genius of Caliph al-Rashid, for he did not wish a governor to remain in office for too long, lest luxury distract him from attending to the interests of the inhabitants and the protection of the frontiers. Subsequently, most of the caliphs adopted this policy and approach, having recognized the benefits it brought to both the people and the state.

Such was the general state of the city of Manbij when the Abbasid Caliphate was at the height of its power and prosperity, and when the caliph held the decisive word in every matter, great or small. However, this situation changed entirely once that era came to an end, as weakness began to erode the Abbasid Caliphate.

## 9 MANBIJ UNDER THE ABBASID CALIPHATE (LATE ABBASID PERIOD)

At the onset of the Abbasid Caliphate's period of decline, with the emergence of numerous states and principalities that were nominally subordinate to the Abbasids, the Tulunids began to rise to prominence. In 265 AH, Ahmad ibn Tulun succeeded in annexing Bilad al-Sham to the authority of his state in Egypt. Consequently, the city of Manbij came under Tulunid rule, as it was one of the cities of Syria. (Ibn-Taghribirdi)

With the rise of the Hamdanid dynasty, the city of Manbij came under its authority. Sayf al-Dawla appointed his cousin al-Harith ibn Abi al'Ala' as governor of Manbij, recognizing its strategic importance. In 348AH, when the Byzantines attacked the city, (Ibn-alAdim) they captured al-Harith and took him to their capital, Constantinople. Sayf al-Dawla ransomed him for a considerable sum. (Ibn-alAthir, 1997)

In 414AH, the Mirdasids succeeded in seizing control of Aleppo, and the city of Manbij came under their authority (al-Ghazi, 1419 AH). Salih ibn Mirdas began to exercise his political influence over the entire region. (Abu-alFida) In 462 AH, Emperor Romanos of Byzantium advanced from Constantinople with a massive army toward Aleppo. His forces entered Manbij, (al-Dhahabi) achieving a military victory over Mahmud ibn Nasr ibn Mirdas. They plundered the city and committed a great massacre there. However, Romanos was eventually forced to retreat, as his army could not withstand the famine that struck due to the disruption of supplies. (Ibn-alAthir, 1997)

During the reign of the Zengid dynasty, the city of Manbij came under their control. In 562 AH, Sultan Nur al-Din Mahmud appointed Qutb al-Din Yanal ibn Hasan as governor of the city, (Abu-alFida) following the rebellion of its ruler, Ghazi ibn Hasan al-Manbijji, against the authority of Sultan Nur al-Din Mahmud. (Ibn-alAthir, 1997)

This was the general condition of the city of Manbij during the era of the petty states that emerged under the Abbasid Caliphate. The city endured continuous wars and conflicts over its control, owing to the strategic importance of its location. Any power seeking to rule Bilad al-Sham in general, and Aleppo in particular, had to secure Manbij in order to consolidate its authority and to prevent the city from becoming an exposed flank vulnerable to any enemy lying in wait.

## 10 THE INCORPORATION OF MANBIJ INTO THE OTTOMAN CALIPHATE

Upon Sultan Selim I's accession to the throne of the Ottoman Empire, the state reached a critical crossroads: either the new sultan would preserve its existing borders or embark upon expansion. This time, Selim resolved to advance into the Arab lands, then under the rule of the Mamluks in Bilad al-Sham and Egypt. (Ibn-Taghribirdi) Inevitably, the expansion of Ottoman frontiers would begin with Bilad al-Sham, given its geographical position, as the region constituted the principal gateway for the Ottomans into the Arab world.

Among the most notable qualities of Sultan Selim I were his strong personality, decisiveness in judgment, and, at the same time, his political acumen. Without such attributes, he would not have been able to expand the frontiers of the empire, which would otherwise have remained as they were during his father's reign. (Ibn-Taghribirdi)

One of the reasons behind Sultan Selim I's bold decision was the inability of the Mamluk state to confront the Safavid threat, which had begun to endanger the borders of the Islamic realm. At the same time, Portuguese influence was expanding in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. (Harb, 1994) These developments compelled the Ottoman sultan to halt Islamic conquests in Europe and redirect his focus toward the Arab East. The principal motive behind this decision was Selim's conviction that he and his empire bore responsibility for safeguarding Muslims across the entire world. (Haridi, 1987)

Ottoman-Mamluk relations steadily deteriorated day by day due to the convergence of several factors. The Mamluks began to shelter Ottoman princes opposed to the sultan, which, from the perspective of Sultan Selim I, posed a threat to the security of the empire and exposed it to danger. The Ottoman sultan regarded this as a clear challenge from the Mamluks. Consequently, this action led to numerous military skirmishes between the two sides, particularly in the small border regions, further intensifying tensions between them. (Metwally, 2005)

With the convergence of all the preceding factors, relations between the Ottomans and the Mamluks deteriorated to the point where military confrontation became inevitable. The Ottoman Empire faced two choices: either to expand, annex the Arab lands, and eliminate the Mamluk state, or to keep its armies confined to their barracks and preserve the territorial gains already achieved. At this juncture, Sultan Selim I made the

decisive choice to march into Bilad al-Sham, confront the Mamluks, and wage what for the Ottomans was a battle of existence.

Sultan Selim I began preparing his military forces and set out toward Bilad al-Sham with an army numbering approximately 60,000 soldiers. (Taqqush S. , 1997) Yet, owing to his mastery of military deception, Selim managed to convince all that he and his army were marching to fight the Safavids in Persia, so that the Mamluks would not take notice of this movement or ready their forces. (Metwally, 2005)

Prior to this Ottoman military movement, a petition was sent to Sultan Selim I by the scholars, notables, and judges of Aleppo. This document, preserved to this day in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul under number 11634, (Harb, 1994) records that the people of Syria had grown deeply discontented with Mamluk oppression, deteriorating economic conditions, and the failure of the ruling elite to adhere to the principles of Islamic law. The petition further declared that the populace would support Sultan Selim I should he decide to advance into Bilad al-Sham, and that they would march from Aleppo to Aintab to welcome the Ottoman sultan and his army. (Ibn-Taghribirdi)

Before the Ottoman forces reached the frontiers of Bilad al-Sham, the Mamluk sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri began preparing his army to confront the Ottomans. He advanced to the area of Marj Dabiq in the countryside of Aleppo. Once both armies arrived at the battlefield, fighting commenced on August 24, 1516, (Pasha, 2018) with the number of soldiers on each side being approximately equal. (al-Idrisi, 1409 AH)

The Ottoman army initiated the assault in order to instill fear within the ranks of the Mamluk forces. Yet, at the outset of the battle, the Mamluk cavalry succeeded in repelling the initial Ottoman attacks. (Pasha, 2018)

The battle between the two sides continued, and on August 28, 1516, the Ottoman army achieved a decisive victory over the Mamluk forces. Sultan Selim I then entered Aleppo with ease, where he was warmly received by the populace, who regarded him as their deliverer from the harsh conditions endured under Mamluk rule, particularly the tyranny of local governors. In the days that followed, the Friday preacher in Aleppo bestowed upon Sultan Selim I the title “Servant of the Two Holy Sanctuaries.” (al-Tabbakh, 1925) Thus, the Ottoman sultan acquired the designation “Protector of the Muslims,” (al-Tabbakh, 1925) a title he had long aspired to and fought to attain. From that point onward, the honorific “Servant of the Two Holy Sanctuaries” was added to the official titles of the Ottoman sultans. (Oztuna, 1988)

From the very first moments of the sweeping victory achieved by the Ottoman army at the Battle of Marj Dabiq, Sultan Selim I treated the inhabitants as if they were Ottoman citizens. He instructed his troops not to plunder the city and to safeguard the property of its residents. This was one of the most notable characteristics of Sultan Selim I in the aftermath of his military triumphs. (Oztuna, 1988)

Thus, the Ottoman army secured a decisive military victory, due in large part to its possession of advanced weaponry, the refusal of the people of Bilad al-Sham to join the Mamluks in their war against the Ottomans, and the withdrawal of certain Mamluk commanders during the battle. Aleppo consequently became part of the Ottoman Caliphate. Since Manbij was administratively subordinate to Aleppo, the Mamluks evacuated it upon hearing of their crushing defeat. An Ottoman force then advanced to the city and entered peacefully, annexing it to the Ottoman Caliphate sometime between August 24 and 30, 1516. From that date onward, Manbij remained under Ottoman rule. Following this battle, the Mamluks lost all authority in Bilad al-Sham, as their state was completely destroyed in the region. (Taqqush S. , 1997)

## 11 CONCLUSION

Research into the history of the ancient city of Manbij, with its rich heritage deeply rooted in antiquity, provides fertile ground for scholars of urban history in general and of the cities of Bilad al-Sham in particular. It offers these researchers a golden opportunity to trace the successive historical transformations that have occurred in the geographical region where Manbij is located—from its foundation, through the civilizations that rose and fell in the city, to its Islamic conquest and the succession of Islamic states that ruled it. Through such a historical survey, the researcher has been able to present a clear and comprehensive vision of this city, which throughout history has stood as a significant meeting point of civilizations between East and West and as a stage for numerous events and interactions across diverse fields.

Through this scholarly endeavor and research efforts, the investigator was able to reach a number of significant conclusions that shed light on the various roles played by the city of Manbij across different historical periods. Historical sources concerned with the city's past reveal that it represented one of the most important cultural centers in the world, having fulfilled a pivotal role as a religious, cultural, and economic hub. Its

geographical position as a frontier outpost on the Byzantine border during successive Islamic dynasties granted it immense importance. A clear testament to this status is the visit of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid, who honored the city by designating it as the “Capital of Capitals.”

Since its foundation by the Hittites in the second millennium BCE, the city played a prominent religious role, as it contained numerous pagan temples frequented by worshippers to perform their rituals. The city was known as Hierapolis, meaning “the Sacred City,” in recognition of its significant religious importance.

With the arrival of the vanguards of the Islamic conquest armies in Bilad al-Sham and the commencement of the campaigns, Muslim commanders recognized the strategic importance of Manbij and devised plans for its capture. This was realized following the victory at the Battle of Yarmouk, when an Islamic force advanced to Manbij and secured its peaceful surrender under the leadership of the distinguished commander ‘Iyad ibn Ghanm in the year 15 AH (636 CE). From that time onward, Manbij became one of the significant Islamic cities. Successive dynasties—including the Umayyads, Abbasids, Ayyubids, Mamluks, and eventually the Ottomans—paid great attention to fortifying and maintaining the city, as it represented a vital flank safeguarding the Islamic state. Thus, Manbij enjoyed considerable importance under all rulers throughout its history.

During the period of the Umayyad Caliphate, the city of Manbij retained its importance as a prominent cultural center, serving as a pivotal hub for economic and cultural activity. However, under the Abbasid Caliphate—particularly in its early phase—the city experienced a remarkable flourishing across various domains, including architecture, administrative reforms, and educational advancement, all of which collectively contributed to its growth and development. By contrast, in the later Abbasid era, Manbij faced significant turmoil and political instability; nevertheless, it managed to maintain a vital presence within the regional landscape, especially amid ongoing struggles for power involving local entities and foreign forces competing for control and influence over the area.

With the advent of the Ottoman era, the incorporation of Manbij into the Ottoman Empire led to a comprehensive reorganization of its administrative framework, placing it under the jurisdiction of Bilad al-Sham, particularly within the province of Aleppo. During the Ottoman period, Manbij was distinguished by remarkable social diversity, as it became home to various ethnic groups, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans,

Circassians, and others. This diversity rendered the city an outstanding model of human coexistence among different communities—an example to be emulated by any city aspiring to become a beacon of shared living.

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### Authors’ Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

### Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study’s findings are fully available within the article.

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