



The Golden Book

**Documenting the Festival
Celebrating**

Aleppo

as *Capital of Islamic Culture*

1427 H / 2006 AD

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Celebrating**

Aleppo

as Capital of Islamic Culture

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Introduction



Aleppo, the blessed city, the ever-renewing history; the regional and world centre of economy, trade and industry, tolerance, thought, art, and originality.

Aleppo goes back to thousands of years. Al-Maghayer (caves) area is a witness to mankind settlement in the city since the Stone Age. Also, the excavations of Tell Qaramel in the outskirts of Aleppo unveil the habitation that dates back to more than ten thousand years.

The city's name Halab was mentioned in the clay tablets found in Mari and Ebla. Khaso (now known as al-Kalasseh) was also mentioned in the clay tablets of Mari since the third millennium BC.

Aleppo has been a prosperous and an important economic centre since the beginning of the third millennium BC. However, the first destruction of the city took place when the Akkadian Rimush conquered it in the middle of the third millennium BC. He ravaged it and captured its king, Lugal Oshomkal.

By the end of the third millennium BC and the

beginning of the second millennium BC, Aleppo was restored, became a prosperous kingdom, then, the capital of the kingdom of the Amorite Yamhad with close links with the other Amorite kingdoms in the Euphrates region such as Mari, Karkamish (today's Jarablus), Babylon, and the Levant (the Middle Eastern region comprising Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine). The clay tablets show various types of the early commercial relations and trade agreements between the Aleppine Yamhad kingdom and the other Amorite kingdoms, especially Mari. The river port Imar (Maskaneh) on the Euphrates was an important port for Aleppo trade extending from the Euphrates to the Gulf across the Amorite cities.

The second destruction of Aleppo was at the onset of the second millennium BC by the Hittites - coming from the north - who razed the kingdom of Yamhad to the ground. However, the city came to life again and became an outstanding religious and economic Hittite centre. Traces of the Hittite period at Aleppo Citadel can be seen in the temple which goes back to the middle of the second millennium BC.

For several centuries Aleppo remained the

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and the Arabian Levant. It was renewed more than once when the Venetian representatives Sologlo, in 1229 AD, and Sagrido, in 1254 AD, came to Aleppo. However, Aleppo was completely ransacked by the Mongol Hulagu and Sahib Sis in 1260 AD. Later in 1400 AD, the second Mongol destruction took place by Tamerlane.

In addition to the devastation caused by wars and battles, Aleppo suffered from a number of destructive earthquakes throughout its long history because of its location on the earthquake line that strikes this area from time to time. The deadliest earthquakes were in 92 BC, 571 AD, and 1170 AD where in the latter the city lost more than 80000 people. In 1822 another deadly earthquake ravaged the city and destroyed more than half of the buildings. Moreover, there were outbreaks of plagues that used to hit Aleppo. The deadliest plague was in 1349 AD which spread in many countries in the world.

However, it is quite rare to find a city that was exposed to waves of destruction such as wars, earthquakes, and plagues and yet it survived them and remained alive and strong. Conversely, a number of similar cities such as Babylon, Nineva, Mari, Ebla, Assure, Rey, Balkh, etc. had all been consigned to oblivion after they had been destroyed.

In the Ottoman era, Aleppo became in the centre of a vast empire extending from the Danube in the west to Iraq in the east including North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Aleppo was therefore transformed from a defensive city to an international economic and trading centre, and its role as an unavoidable route for the trading caravans carrying silk, spices and other products was established.

During the last millennium, Aleppo had control of world trade for being a decisive and pivotal land route until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 when it lost 93% of its trade for the sea route across

the canal. That was the biggest economic blow that struck the city throughout its long history.

A few centuries earlier, and by the discovery of the Cape in 1497 by the Portuguese, Aleppo's trade declined but flourished again as the international marine piracy made the land route passing through Aleppo safer.

The historian Ibn al-Shihna states that what used to be sold in one day in Aleppo during the 15th century would take three months to be sold in Cairo. Consequently, that massive and rapid trade expansion had led to remarkable developments in commercial and economic facilities that could be seen in:

1. The remarkable expansion in the number of covered suqs (bazaars) within a period of 25 years during the Ottoman rule, especially by governors such as Mohammed Ali Pasha, Dukajeen, Khusraw Pasha, and Barham Pasha. These suqs measured 16 hectares and were 29 in number. If they were lined up end to end, they would measure around 15 km. Therefore, they have been considered the largest shopping centres in the world, each distributed according to specialty (i.e. professions and crafts) such as Al-Hibal (ropes), Al-Sagha (goldsmiths), Al-Sooof (wool), Al-Attareen (spice dealers), Al-Zarb (hand-made woolen walls made from black goatskin twine used by the bedouins for their tents), Al-Sabun (soap), among others. Moreover, the suqs are characterized by a unique system of lighting, ventilation and environmental and climatic homogeneity.

2. The significant expansion in the number of khans (caravanserais) that exceeded 80 in the 17th century. Foreign consuls and representatives of trading agencies such as the French Darfio talked about them in the last quarter of the 17th century. Those khans were able to accommodate a caravan consisting of thousands of camels, its men and guards and all its needs. A lot of those khans still remain. The most important khans are Khan Al Wazir, Khan Al-Jumruk, Khan Al-Nahhasin, Khan Qurt Bey, Khan Al-Shuneh, Khan Al-Sabun, among others.

3. Qaysariyat: These are industrial workshops annexed to khans. They make all the needed crafts that complement the industrial role of the city. It is well known that Aleppo used to have 15000 silk weaving looms when that trade was in its

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battlefield between the Hittites, Mitannians and the Pharaohs of Egypt who were racing to occupy it for its outstanding strategic and commercial location until Pharaoh Thutmose III entered it in 1473 BC. Later, the Mitannians and the Hittites returned to Aleppo. By the beginning of the first millennium BC, it became part of the Aramaic kingdoms that spread over the Levant and the Euphrates Basin.

Aleppo was again destroyed in 853 BC by the Assyrian Shalmanasser III. In 612 BC the Chaldeans entered Aleppo, and later the Achaemenian Persians who, by Khusraw I, destroyed it in 540 BC. It remained under the dominance of the Persians until the Greek occupation in 332 BC when it was renamed Beroea. Later, the Seleucid, the Roman and Byzantine empires had ruled it successively until the Islamic Arab conquest in 636 AD.

During all those times, Aleppo remained the world economic centre that connected continents and oceans. It also remained a mandatory trade route through which caravans coming from the Far East to Europe and from the Arabian Peninsula to the Black Sea used to pass.

The importance of Aleppo is due to many factors, foremost of which are:

- its location on the crossroads of axial routes between the Euphrates, the Mediterranean, Anatolia and the Arabian Peninsula.
- the fertile lands around Aleppo that made it an important centre for agriculture and pasture.
- the white limestone that characterized its buildings throughout history and ensured their preservation and continuity.
- the succession of states, empires, nations and civilizations has given it cultural richness, tolerance, and respect for diversity and recognition of «the others».
- the economic prosperity provided by the above factors has made Aleppo an international and distinguished location throughout the ages.

During the successive Islamic periods, Aleppo was considered one of the largest cities in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. It became an

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heyday and where mulberry trees were around for silkworm breeding.

4. The great number of consulates and foreign communities representing most countries of the world (exceeding more than 80 consulates and agencies) in the 17th century. The foremost of which were Al-Banadiqa (the Venetians), the Dutch, and the English. In 1535 Sulaiman al-Qanouni signed an agreement with France through which a French consulate and commercial representation were opened in Aleppo. Other agreements with Britain and Holland followed.

5. The formidable defence fortifications in the form of gates, towers, walls and well trained soldiers.

6. The ancient and distinguished houses in the city's quarters as an indication of economic lavishness and architectural and commercial prosperity particularly in quarters such as al-Farafa, al-Bayada, al-Aqaba, al-Jalhum, al-Jdaydeh, and later al-Jamiliya and al-Aziziya in the last century.

7. The artistic and musical prosperity for which Aleppo was famous, such as the Aleppine muwashaha, qudoos, and mawwals (forms of folk music and singing) which were the fruit of the great economic and architectural prosperity the city had witnessed.

In the 20th century Aleppo underwent new

economic pressures manifesting themselves in the form of the usurpation of Alexandretta (the natural port of Aleppo) and severing the commercial routes with Anatolia. However, Aleppo regained its position as the Levantine economic base in the fields of agriculture, industry and commerce. In addition, the economic weight of the general establishments of railway, cottons and cereals helped Aleppo constitute more than half of the Levantine economy.

It is no secret that Aleppo was the first Arab city in which a chamber of commerce was established. It was also the first Arab city that knew about banking at world level. And in the past four centuries, the circulated currencies used to be the most widespread international currencies regarding cash, transfer, and banking.

It is also no secret that throughout history, and because of its cosmopolitan nature, Aleppo has been considered as an Arab model city owing to the geographic location, historical role, and the nature of the fabric of the population which is varied and harmonious in a unique framework of coexistence and mutual respect. Despite all the circumstances that Aleppo has undergone, these characteristics are still preserved till today.

The Organization of Islamic Conference's choice of both Aleppo and Isfahan as Capitals of Islamic Culture was neither accidental nor capricious. In the



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light of the criteria used for selecting the cities after Holy Mecca, the cultural and heritage roles came first. In this respect, Isfahan comes at the top of the list as a non-Arab city. And if we were to count the number of scholars, literary figures and researchers whose names were associated with Isfahan, they would amount to about 200 names; some of whom are well known such as Abi al-Faraj al-Asfahani - author of the book *Al-Aghani* (The Songs), al-Imad al-Asfahani (the historian, and a vizier in the Ayyubid state), and dozen narrators of the Prophet's sayings (hadeeth), scholars of religion, linguistics and literature. In this respect, Baghdad excels in the number of prominent figures who were named after it and had the title «Al-Baghdadi». Aleppo comes third and is equal with Rey with regard to those who have the title «Al-Halabi» or «Al-Razi», whereas Isfahan comes second.

However, this criterion was not literally sufficient on its own. Instead, it includes the quality of the shining periods. In this regard, Aleppo comes first being characterized by its Hamadani lavish court under Saif al-Dawla about whom al-Tha'alibi says, «the scholars, literary figures, and poets who used to meet in Aleppo under Saif al-Dawla had not been seen in any other caliph's, sultan's, king's or prince's court.» Some were the pioneers in their field throughout the Islamic history, such as:

- Al-Farabi came first in philosophy and music.
- Al-Mutanabbi came first in Arabic poetry.
- Al-Sanawbari came first in the poetry of nature.
- Ibn Jinni came first in properties of language.
- Abu Firas al-Hamadani came first in the poetry of chivalry.
- Al-Khawarizmi came first in linguistics, lexicology, logic, art, and medicine.
- Abu Ali al-Farisi, Ibn Khalaweih, and Abu al-Tayyeb al-Laghawi all were pioneers in linguistics.
- Abu al-Faraj al-Ajali and his daughter Maryam were astronomers; and Al-Raqqi was a physician and a poet. Moreover, Al-Khalidiyan counted more than 10000 lines of verse recited about Saif al-Dawla. Also in al-Tha'alibi's book, *Yateematu Al-Dahr* the history of that period was written.

Furthermore, and throughout the ages the names of many poets and literary figures - such as

Al-Buhturi and his beloved Ulwa al-Halabiya and al-Ma'arri, whose mother was from the tribe of Bari Sabeeka from Aleppo - were linked to Aleppo. Al Ma'arri wrote his best production about this city, for example *Risalatul Ghufran* (The Treatise of Forgiveness) and *Assahil wa Shahij* (The One that Neighs and the One that Brays). In the former, he says that in the imagined journey for Ali Ibn al-Qarih al-Halabi, God has chosen cooks from Aleppo to be responsible for the kitchen of Paradise.

On the other hand, the criterion of architecture was there on the minds for the choice of the would-be Capital of the Islamic Culture. In this regard, Aleppo outdoes Isfahan and other cities in the Islamic world due to conditions that are not available in any city but Aleppo. These conditions are:

- The Islamic architecture includes all the urban functions: the defence construction is symbolized by the citadel, gates, doors, towers and tunnels dug under the city. Aleppo Citadel is characterized by its being the oldest in the world, 7000 BC, according to the ancient finds which were unearthed. It is also the largest inside a city with its tight defensive moat, networks of tunnels under and around, and the historical, political, military and cultural role that it had played during its lifetime.
- The religious architecture is represented by the mosques, which were more than a thousand mosques in Greater Aleppo, and the churches, which were more than 50. Some of the mosques go back to the first century AH, for example al-Shu'aybiya Mosque in Bab Antakiya (Gate of Antioch) goes back to 16 AH, and the Great Umayyad Mosque which goes back to 98 AH. There are other mosques that cover all the Islamic periods that Aleppo had known with their various architectural styles whether Seljuk, Zengid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, Ottoman or modern.

Also, in Aleppo, there are a number of Sufi takaya and zawaya (corners for religious activities) that represent the various Sufi orders such as Mawlawiya, Qadiriya, Naqshbandiya, Shathiliya, etc.

- As for the urban architecture, it includes everyday needs such as Suqs, khans, qaysariyat, hammams (public baths), bimaristans

(hospitals), harat (quarters), various houses, qasatil (water supply reservoirs), khanqahat (free resting places for travellers), schools, etc. All these constructional functions can be seen in abundance in Aleppo. Some of them are exclusive to Aleppo such as the 29 covered Suqs clustering around a central straight Suq stretching from Bab Antakiya to the entrance of Suq al-Zarb in front of the Citadel. This distinction of urban functions corresponds to a chronological one. According to the excavations in Tell al-Qaramel, history in Aleppo started in the tenth millennium BC.

- Moreover, for thousands of years, over 30 civilizations coexisted in Aleppo. The most prominent of these civilizations start with the Sumerian, Akkadian, Amorite, Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldean, Hittite, Mittanite, Egyptian, Achaemenid, Aramean, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Arab kingdoms before Islam and then the Islamic civilization which, because of its tolerance, flexibility, and recognition of the others was like a cloak that wrapped them all.
- Also, through the succession of the Islamic periods, we can find architectural styles in Aleppo that date back to all the periods which the successive states had known from the Rashidi era to the modern era - passing through all the states that Aleppo had known. Each of them left particular architectural marks on the city. And perhaps the Ayyubid era, in particular, witnessed richness in the architectural movement. Similarly, an enormous economic development associated with necessary constructions such as khans, suqs and qaysariyat were witnessed at the beginning of the Ottoman period.

Isfahan, on the other hand, is one of the old cities in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is located in the centre of Iran. The Zendruth River, called «the Nile of Isfahan», flows through the city and has a number of beautiful historical bridges over it. Isfahan still retains a number of beautiful architectural pieces from the Islamic periods that followed successively, particularly the Seljuk period and onwards.

Besides the criteria of cultural heritage, there were some issues related to the economic role of the cities. In this regard, Aleppo forms the most important link on the international Silk Road due to its location on the crossroads that joins East

Asia with Anatolia and then Europe, and also due to its location on an approximately equal distance between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. The Euphrates used to be a commercial water passage for ships coming from the Gulf, to Pals (Maskaneh) Port, which was an anchorage. Then the caravans would continue to Aleppo on camels, and after that to Iskenderun Port on the Mediterranean. This explains the huge number of khans that were ready to accommodate caravans consisting of thousands of camels. Moreover, what used to be sold in one day in Aleppo would take three months to be sold in Cairo.

Aleppo still retains a number of old khans such as Khan Al Banadiqa (the Venetians) which reflects the commercial agreement signed in 1207 AH between al-Zahir Ghazi al-Ayyubi, king of Aleppo and Petro Mariniani, the Venetian representative.

It is no surprise, then, that the early foreign consulates were established in Aleppo, so were the first chamber of commerce and the first banks. And despite the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and losing a huge part of its trade, it was able to maintain a distinguished commercial position through the periods that followed.

As for Isfahan, it plays a prominent economic role owing to its location in the middle of Iran, and to its being widely famous for its traditional industries, particularly the excellent Persian rugs, copper, wood, silk, gold and silver industries. Nevertheless, it is a currently important industrial and commercial centre.

Aleppo is characterized by its preservation of the musical heritage, in both genres: eastern and western. Therefore, it has become a shining centre where music studies converge. Suffice it to say that a good example is al-Farabi's early arrival at Aleppo to become the most prominent figure in Saif al-Dawla al-Hamadani's court.

Similarly, the great scholar Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani came with his book Al-Aghani (The Songs), which is considered the most important book in the history of Arabic literature, singing and music whose reputation reached all the sultans of his time including the caliph of Baghdad. He preferred to come to Aleppo to present his book to its honourable prince Saif al-Dawla. More than two centuries later, the historiographer and vizier al-Imad al-Asfahani came to be one of the pillars of

the Ayyubid state in the Levant and Egypt.

Aleppo has inherited the Andalusian muwashah and developed it until it has become a distinguished type called Al-Muwashah Al-Halabi (The Aleppine muwashah) from which the famous Aleppine qudood emerged. From the latter, the unique singing in the religious chanting has developed through the Sufi corners and the numerous bands over the centuries till today. Aleppo has therefore become the capital of singing and music appeal, of both religious and emotional genres. Also there appeared great figures from Aleppo who enriched the musical field with an extensive and rich heritage.

Based on all of these criteria, in 1427 AH/2006 AD, the Islamic Conference agreed to choose both Aleppo and Isfahan as Capitals of Islamic Culture, after Holy Mecca which was chosen as Capital of Islamic Culture in 2005. Hence both Aleppo and Isfahan came next after Holy Mecca. This issue in principle aims at demonstrating the tolerant and flexible aspect of the Islamic civilization. The Islamic Conference recommended to start the necessary preparations of the celebrations that would last for one year by forming specialized committees, providing the necessary funding, setting up programmes of numerous activities such as symposia, lectures, exhibitions, brochures, art and heritage performances, restoring historical buildings, designing leaflets about the host city, informational banners, TV commercials, a specialized magazine, extensive media coverage (press, radio, TV), extensive meetings in forums, mosques, churches, universities and schools, and organizing contests and events in literature, poetry, art, drama, and movies (cinema, TV and documentaries). It is quite important for a huge round-the-year programme to be organized to cover a large number of media, cultural and artistic activities and exhibits as well as invite prominent names from all over the world to attend this activity.

This great occasion is unique and unrepeatable, and therefore it is our task to overcome all the obstacles that might get in the way of carrying out the scheduled projects and activities however big or diverse they might be. Meanwhile, the competition between Aleppo and Isfahan will determine which one will come first. Based on this, and in conformity with the criteria by which Aleppo was chosen, we have summarized these criteria and set a general

framework for the activities as follows:

By decision of the Organization of Islamic Conference, Aleppo was chosen to be the Capital of Islamic Culture in 1427 AH - 2006 owing to the fulfillment of the approved criteria of choice such as the architectural heritage, the cultural, scientific and artistic background, in addition to its economic role.

Aleppo is considered a good example of Islamic cities for religious tolerance, recognition of the other, and coexistence of all religions, races, and creeds under the umbrella of a sublime humane civilization that embraces all the preceding cultures within the framework of the flexible Islamic culture that calls for dialogue, wisdom and fair preaching.

Aleppo has also been regarded as an example of Islamic cities for its Islamic architecture throughout the times since 16 AH to the present day going through the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, including the Hamadanid, Seljuk, Zengid, and Ayyubid periods; and later the Mamluk followed by the Ottoman periods. Moreover, the Islamic architecture performed a variety of constructional functions such as the citadel, gates, suqs, khans, mosques, churches, hammams, and old houses.

On the other hand, Aleppo throughout its history presented a rich intellectual heritage through Saif al-Dawla al-Hamadani's court featuring the earliest prominent figures of thought such as al-Farabi, al-Khawarizmi, al-Mutanabbi, and al-Asfahani, as well as through al-Zahir Ghazi al-Ayyubi's court. Moreover, and for more than 2000 years, Aleppo had been the most important commercial centre on the international Silk Road, and all other roads of economic activities.

Because Aleppo was chosen Capital of Islamic Culture, preparations for the ceremony were made through a number of activities. Those activities included:

- 27 international scientific symposia throughout the year 2006 as well as 26 large local symposia.
- 250 lectures distributed through the city's and university's platforms.
- Publishing more than 180 books about Aleppo and Islamic culture.
- Restoring, rehabilitating 20 ancient buildings to be used in the celebrations.

- Organizing exhibitions for fine art, photography, manuscripts, documents, costumes, traditional handicrafts, foods, and books.
- Intensive media covering:
 - Issuing The Archaeologies Magazine, a specialized magazine for this occasion.
- Holding periodic press conferences.
- All the year-round radio programme.
- A live TV programme to cover the activities, and if needed, seek assistance from Arab satellites.
- Booklets, leaflets, newspaper articles and magazines.
- Public relations activity.
- Trophies, medals, souvenirs, certificates of appreciation.
- Visiting historical and touristic sites.
- Artistic activities by giving concerts, performing plays, showing films but placing emphasis on religious chants, the Arab Aleppine heritage and mawlawiyah.
- The great opening celebration in March 18, 2006 and the closing celebration in March 21, 2006.
- Competitions for memorization of the Holy Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet (God's blessing and peace be upon him).
- Poetry contest.
- Painting and photography contest.
- Youth artistic performance contest.

All the activities of the Festival were successfully and superbly carried out owing to official and unofficial intensive efforts. Meanwhile, and although both the Ministry of Culture and Aleppo Governorate made the greatest official effort, other bodies made enormous praiseworthy efforts, foremost among them are:

- Aleppo University - the giant scientific edifice that offered symposia, book publication, and extensive participation in exhibitions and parties, and thus compensated for a part of the time shortage and limited resources. Special thanks go to Prof. Mohammad Nizar Akil, President of Aleppo University.
- The Directorate of General Iftaa, represented by Dr. Ahmad Badr Eddin Hassoun, the Grand Mufti, who published a number of books and

took part in organizing symposia and lectures. Also involved, was the Iftaa of Aleppo.

- Both Chambers of Commerce and Industry where each organized a big symposium and published some books.
- The archbishops who took part in symposia, books and concerts.
- Some patriotic individuals each of whom donated for special works such as schools and mosques restorations, unveiling the Western Wall of Aleppo, and al-Bimaristan al-Nouri. However, a special chapter has been made for restorations, publication of various books, participation in artistic activities such as concerts and exhibitions.
- Official and private fine art exhibition buildings that featured more than a hundred excellent exhibits on fine art, photography, and traditional handicrafts.
- The Artists' Union that enriched the Festival with events and festivals in Sa'adallah al-Jabri Square and indoor halls.
- The artistic bands that performed at the spectacular opening ceremony whose lyrics about the history of Aleppo were written by Mr. Mohammad Kujjah. Moreover, several artistic performances were presented during the year of celebration.
- The great Enana Troupe led by Jihad Mofleh performed Queen Dhaifa Khatoun superbly at the Festival closing ceremony. The play was inspired, prepared and supervised by Mohammad Kujjah, reviewed by Waleed Ikhlasi, and written by Mohammad Abu Ma'tooq.
- All countrymen who contributed to the success of the large festivity which was attended by President Bashar Al-Assad.

Furthermore, the opening ceremony marked the inauguration of the Great Umayyad Mosque by the President, after the successful completion of restoration efforts praised by UNESCO. ☺