

# The Old City of Sana'a

*(Scientific Paper)*



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The city of Sana'a stands out as a shining star in the history of Arabism since eternity. It is the origin of the Arabs and the source of authenticity. It was, and will remain the source of ancient civilizations. It was built hundreds of years ago. It was coeval with many petty states and different intellectual ideologies, and each played a role in the city of Sana'a, at the intellectual or urban, political, or economic point of view. Despite all that, the city of Sana'a was and will remain the official identity of every Yemeni citizen inside Yemen and abroad.

**Naming:** There were many opinions on that, as the linguists of Old Yemeni language "Al-Musnad" confirmed that "San'oo" is the old name for the city of Sana'a, meaning the fortified-place, which appears by the walls and forts surrounding the city, as for the name Sana'a in the language of the old Yemeni inscriptions (Al-Musnad), it is derived from the word "Sanaa", meaning fortification and prevention, and it is said "Tasanaa" which means fortified.

And in the designations of some Yemeni places, "musanna'a", the plural of "masane'h, and the verb "yasna'ouhou" all in the sense of the fortified villages in the high places. The city of "Shem" was named after "Shem", the son of Noah, peace be upon him, because of his request for a moderate-weather site, so it was the city of Sana'a. It was called "Azal" city, which is a name mentioned in the Torah, and he is one of the sons of Qahtan, son of Amer, son of Shamikh, son of Shem, son of Noah, and it was said that when Al-Ahbash (the Ethiopians) saw Sana'a built with stones, they called it "Sanaa" (craft), and despite all the names, the city of Sana'a is still called by all the names, Azal - Shem - Sana'a.

**Location:** The Old City of Sana'a is located at the junction of longitude 12-44 north, and latitude 110-15. It is located in an upland basin at an altitude of around 2200-2300 meters, and because of its location, the city has a moderate climate compared to the surrounding cities. The temperature is moderate in the winter and moderate and rainy in the summer. Due to this climate, the city attracts internal and external tourism. It is geographically located at the western foot of "Jabal Nuqum" (a mountain) connecting three of the most famous Yemeni tribes, which are "Banu al-Harith" from the north, "Sanhan" from the south, and "Bani Matar" from the west, thus it was a place of encounter for the Yemeni tribes, as it represented a trade center for the tribes from various

villages surrounding the city since ancient times. It was divided into neighborhoods known as “Ad Durub”, which are “Al-Sarar”, known today as “Suq al-Baqar”, “Dawud”, “Talha”, and “Darb al-Qatee’e” (Al- Qatee’e neighborhood) known as Bab al-Yemen (Yemen Gate) on the southern side. “Al Sailah” (a large dry watercourse) that descends from “Jabal Nuqum” splits Sana’a from East to West, and then the stream of “Al Sailah” turns towards the north of the city as a result of torrential rains and torrents.

**The emergence of the Old City of Sana’a:** Historians find it extremely difficult to determine the beginning of emergence of the Old City of Sana’a, due to the lack of documented references for that. However, Sana’a is the city of Sabaeen and Himyaritic, which is the first city after the Tawafan (cataract) and the oldest cities of the Arabian Peninsula that was and remains the most wonderful city on earth for its natural and urban beauty represented by its environment, climate, architecture and people. It can be said that the historical development of the Old City of Sana’a passed through three phases, which are:

- The pre-1500 AD phase, the old city representing the eastern sector.
- The 1500 - 1962 AD phase: Bir al-Azab neighborhood and Al Qaa region, representing the western sector.
- The 1962 – 2000 phase: the modern neighborhoods that represent the final phase, which is Sana’a today.

Ghamdan castle, which was built at the foot of “Jabal Nuqum”, is the first nucleus of the Old City of Sana’a, as the city was formed from a group of villages scattered in the upland basin of Sana’a, then those villages merged into a single urban entity for the general security interest of all, and thus the city developed to become a city with walls, in the middle of which you can see the Al-Qalis Cathedral before Islam then the Jami’ al Kabir (Great Mosque) and then Suq al- Madina ( the city market).



*Al-Qalis Cathedral- Old city of Sana'*



*The Great Mosque – Old city of Sana'a*

Like Suq al-Madina, the western edge, the northern wall of the city flourished, and it was called the “Sha’ub” neighborhood. Hence, many petty states succeeded in ruling the Old City of Sana’a, including the kingdom of “Saba”, “Hamiyar”, the “Sulayhid” dynasty, and the “Yafari” state. During those historical periods, the city was exposed to many natural disasters (such as torrents and rains) and invasions (such as the Abyssinian, Persian, and Ottoman invasions) as it was exposed to torrential floods in 1581 AD which destroyed many houses and gardens around the southern trench, and in 1878 AD, the flood swept through the city, leaving 100 houses destroyed, thus the city was losing much of its heritage despite the restoration and maintenance operations that were taking place in the period of those petty states. The urban development in Old Sana’a had many influences, the most important of which was the commercial effect. The trade location of the city was a junction for various commercial caravans such as frankincense, incense, Yemeni textiles, silver, precious stones, and many different commercial materials, so many general services were found, including markets, “samsaras”<sup>1</sup> (khans or brokerage inns), and “hammams” (bath houses) to support social and commercial life inside the Old City of Sana’a.

**Old Sana’a markets:** The markets were a manifestation of the development of the Old City of Sana’a so many shops were found in these markets. They

<sup>1</sup> Used to perform specific functions that were complementary to the business of the market, such as services of accommodation, storage, safekeeping of deposits and precious items.

have reached about one thousand and seven hundred shops in 2004 AD distributed in more than one specialized market, and the geographical location of the market extended between “Bab al-Yemen” and “Bab al-Sha’ub”. These markets flourished with many industries, handicrafts, and agricultural products, as they used to export leather, shoes, carpets, pottery, agricultural products such as fruits and coffee, and craft industries such as silver, pottery, and other industries. The Yemeni markets were and are still called by the name of the commodity or the profession including for example, Suq al - Milh (the salt market), Suq al- Janabi (the daggers market), Suq al -Fatla (threads market), Suq al - Fakhar (pottery market), Suq al - Najjarin (carpenters’ market), Suq al - Hab (grains market). And these markets perform many functions as selling, exporting and importing various products, workshops and handicraft places, and other markets, most of which still exist today.



*Al - Janabi industry- Old city of Sana'a*



*Suq al-Nuhas - Old city of Sana'a*



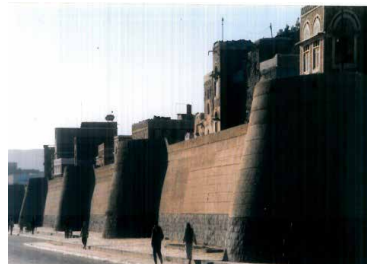
*Suq al-Milh- Old city of Sana'a*

In conjunction with the commercial activity of the city and its inhabitants, many **Samsaras** (khans or hotels) were found. In the past, their number reached 12 “samsaras” then the process of building those “samsaras” developed as the statistics of 2004 AD showed, their number reached 53 “samsaras”. They perform many functions as they are comfort stations for travelers and their animals, stations for selling and buying some crops, such as raisins and Qishr (coffee husks), stations for exchanging silver coins and cash, and stations

for storing some crops. Among those “samsaras” are “Samsarat al-Mizan” (al-Qishr), “Samsarat al –Hab” (grains), “Samsarat Dallal”, and Samsarat al – Hawa’ej.

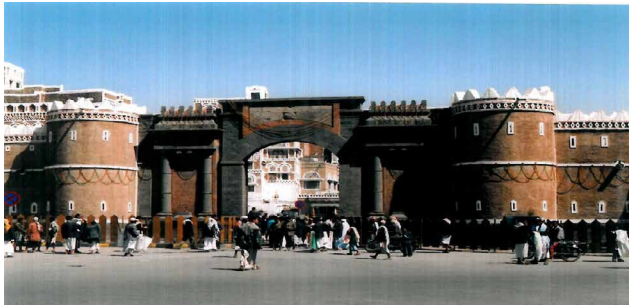
**The Wall of Sana’a and its gates:** The emergence of the Wall of Sana’a coincided with the lifestyles in the city. The location of the city of Sana’a generated a lot of greedy people trying to dominate it, such as petty states that arose around the city or external forces such as Persians and Abyssinians. So, the city’s landmarks showed protection and defense by building the Wall surrounding it. Among its most important components are defense installations and buildings, in order to enhance defense capacity and repel external threats, preserve the city’s internal security and stability, and support the state’s political and economic role.

Abu al-Hasan, ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani mentioned in the writing of al-Iklil (the Diadem) that Sana’a was walled by the king of “Saba’ ” , “Sha’r Awtar”, who built it and added nine gates, and there are cylindrical towers on the length of the wall called (Nawbah). There is about a 40-meter length between each tower, and they are considered to be military fortifications to defend the city. Thus, the wall was ruined and destroyed several times because of the military campaigns against Yemen, such as the Persian, Ethiopian, and Ottoman campaigns. Therefore, the wall has been expanded, repaired and renovated during the rule of the various petty states over Sana’a, where “al-Razi” explained that “Muhammad bin Yu’fir”, who was appointed by the Abbasid caliphate ruler of Sana’a, rebuilt the wall, and the Sulayhid king “Ali bin Muhammad al-Sulayhi” restored it with plaster and stones. Many images of the demolition of a part of the wall due to the military conflicts were also found and torrential rains and floods contributed to its destruction and demolition, specifically the floods of 1985 AD that destroyed a part of it.



**Wall of Old city of Sana'a**

Many gates have been found to the Wall of Sana'a, and the number of those gates has not been precisely determined, as the sources indicate that the gates that accompanied the process of building the Wall since the first time are four gates, Bab al-Yemen in the south, Bab Sha'ub in the north, Bab al-Qasr in the east, and Bab Assabah in the west. Thus, with the destruction and vandalism that the Wall was subjected to over hundreds of years, the gates were built, developed and renovated, and through tracking the old geographical maps of the city, the old gates of the Wall were identified as follows: Bab Setran, Bab al-Yemen, Bab Khazimeh, Bab Assabah, Bab al-Nizli, Bab al-Shaghadif, Bab al-Sha'ub, Bab al-Shahari, Bab ar-Rum, Bab Abilah, Bab al-Qaa, Bab al-Balaqa.



*Bab al-Yemen (Yemen gate) – the most popular gates of the Old city of Sana'a*

In general, the Old Sana'a Wall, its towers (Nawbat) and gates were exposed to erosion factors such as winds, torrential rains and floods, and this was accompanied by the military campaigns against Sana'a, the negligence and lack of interest in the process of maintaining and renovating it periodically, which led to the destruction of a part of the Wall.



*Collapsing part of the Old Sana'a Wall*



**Sana'a City houses:** The city's planning includes the system of neighborhoods. The houses appear to be contiguous and in a multi-story system as they are characterized by vertical expansion (as showed in the picture). This is due to the architectural and ingenuity of the Yemeni mind, where the investment is made for a specific plot of land to suit the large number of members of a single family. Many families in Sana'a prefer to stay in the same house, so we can find in one house the grandfather, grandmother, their children and grandchildren, and the uncles).



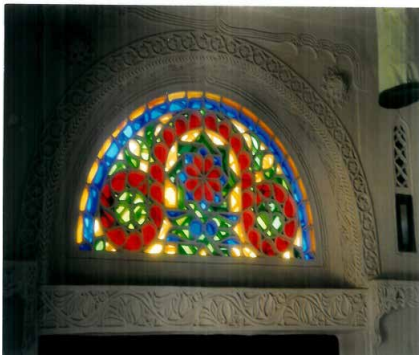
### *Houses of the Old city of Sana'a*

The number of floors varies between two and seven floors, so that each floor represents a compartment for one family, and it serves what we call today as an apartment. The floors are separated by an architectural belt called “Zinnar” as it appears on the exterior of the house. It is built out of gypsum and mud bricks and features geometric shapes, as showed in the pictures. Hence, the ground floor and the first floor are built out of stones, and the ground floor is used for the storage of various types of grains (such as rye, corn and other agricultural crops), the storage of firewood, livestock stables and the mill for grinding flour. The first floor is called the “diwan” and it is as long as the house in most cases and this is due to its special role in the funerals, weddings, and solving problems between people. The second floor is for the family (women and children), and on the upper floor as in many old houses of Sana'a, there is a rectangular room called the “mafraj” (men's living area) (its plural form is “mafarej”) consisting of a group of vents with wide and low windows in which to sit for a nap and rest, and those sitting in it enjoy watching the outskirts of Sana'a and its gardens.



*A house of Sana'a showing the belt (az-zinnar) between floors*

The houses of Old Sana'a are distinguished by their windows that consist of two sets of opening, where the lower part extends to the ground and is closed with wooden shutters as showed in the picture, and above this part is the upper opening and is called "qamariya" and it is located directly above the window sill and from the upper side, and is built in the form of a semicircular opening. Its diameter applies to the window sill, and in order to cover the opening, colored glass pieces are cut with variable sizes according to the demand, or with a crystal, and the fixing process is done with gypsum. The benefit of the "qamariya" (lunar) is to allow light to enter the window as the light is like the twilight of the sun during sunset.



*Yemeni "qamariya" in its beautiful shape  
the Yemeni house*



*Shutters for the wooden windows of*

The architectural heritage of the houses of the city of Sana'a suffers from destruction and negligence for years, in addition to the rains in recent years, as many houses have been demolished due to their oldness, and the lack of regular renovation and maintenance of these houses. The ongoing conflicts in Yemen since more than five years made it worse as Sana'a houses were damaged in several ways, some collapsed and some cracked.



*Old Sana'a houses were destroyed by the conflict and torrents*

### **Building materials:**

The Yemeni building materials for houses, fences and castles varied, as the Yemeni construction applied stones, clay, gypsum, bricks and “qadad” (plaster), because they are materials that retain heat in the day and lose it slowly at night, in addition to their ability to withstand the erosion factors. So many of Sana'a residents prefer housing in old houses due to the moderate temperature in them, and with the variety of building materials for the old houses of Sana'a and the accuracy of the Yemeni construction, the city of Sana'a was and is still one of the landmarks of civilization on Earth.

The most famous of these materials are the following:

**Qadad:** It is a material used to paint the roofs, walls and floors of houses to prevent water leakage, connect and strengthen the foundation of these houses

and fill in the voids to install the foundation, and it consists of two basic materials: “nūreh” (baked lime) and “shāsh” (volcanic scoria ), The two elements are mixed together with water and require days of manual labor, then the walls and places are painted over with “qadad” for days and it is used with precision and care, and when it dries, it’s massaged with a thin layer of grease until the surface is smooth.

**Stones:** The stones are the most important materials that are used in the construction of Yemeni palaces, fortresses, and castles, and other materials are made from it such as plaster, “nūreh”, and “qadad” in order to make smooth, paint and embellish the interior walls and the external facades of homes and palaces, and the stones are dealt with according to their quality.

**Clay:** It is one of the most important building materials in Yemen in general because it is easily provided, accessed and shaped. It is mixed with water and dried with sunlight, and it may be mixed with straw and water and left to ferment and then the construction process is carried out. It may also be burned in specialized ovens and called bricks. We find many old houses built of clay.

**Gypsum:** It is one of the most important building materials that refine the Yemeni architecture with beautiful shapes, because it is easily shaped by the hands of the Yemenis. The gypsum is produced out of burning limestone in special incinerators that are now abundant in northeastern Sana'a.

**Bricks:** They are pieces of clay measuring 16 cm in width, 4 cm in thickness, which are dried in the sunlight, then burned in specialized ovens, and they take a color closest to coral (between brown and red).

**Wood:** It is used for the roofs of houses, as most of the houses’ roofs rest on wooden pillars, and doors and windows are also made out of wood.

Old Sana'a, with its houses, walls and markets, represents the Yemeni identity for all Yemeni people, so it is necessary to preserve its heritage and the originality of the architectural art of its buildings, especially with the ongoing conflicts over the past six years, the torrential rains and floods, the negligence and weakness of restoration, as many of the city's residents find it extremely difficult to restore and maintain the buildings of the city, due to the ongoing conflict, instability and fear of the continuation of this conflict and its consequences, and this is accompanied by the high cost of living and lack of financial liquidity. So it is imperative to strive to preserve a civilization of thousands of years from collapse or extinction.



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