



Beit Farahi ... the second largest of the Jewish palaces of Damascus

Haitham Qadah



Like 57

Share 57

عزود

The Jews of Damascus in the Ottoman Era and the Story of Farahi's House

The number of Damascus Jews in **1548-1549** was estimated at two thousand to three thousand and five hundred people, distributed among **503** characters (i.e. the inhabitants of a single household or family in its broad sense), and thus constituted **5-6%** of the total population of Damascus. The number rose to five thousand in **1840** (less than Aleppo, which at that time had six thousand Jews) and approached nine thousand in **1859** (compared to **22,000** Christians), to **6265** according to the **1892-1893** census.

Practically all Damascus Jews spoke Arabic as their mother tongue (the Sephardic abandoned the Ladino Judeo-Spanish language) even if they studied Hebrew for learning and worship. Members of the sect coexisted with their neighbors and shared their culture, music and food.

The Farahi family was mentioned for the first time in the records of Damascus in the late nineteenth century, and court documents showed that they were active in the real estate trade, especially in the Jewish quarter or locality that the other sects shared with them. The Farsi practiced banking business (more on Haim's relationship with Ahmed Pasha al-Jazzar later), and they bought real estate in the Jewish Quarter after the **1759** earthquake, in which they paid huge sums by the standards of that era, even though today it is not possible for us to determine these buildings with sufficient accuracy.

Shaul (Shehadeh) began building a Farahi house after he bought a number of houses to combine her land in his new house, which was practically completed by the year **1805** AD when the German traveler Otto von Richter visited the house and described his al-Barani dish. Youssef Farahi (son of Shehadeh and Haim's brother-the teacher) welcomed the British journalist and traveler James Silk Buckingham into the house in **1816** and told him that it took twenty-five years to build. Many family members lived in the house, and there is a mention of three of Shaul's sons (Haim, Raphael, and Joseph) who lived in it.



FIG. 8 *The Old City from a Jewish house, looking towards the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, 1903 (Keystone View Company/Gifford M. Mast).*

The attached 1903 photograph is taken from the south and east to the north and west from the roof of a Jewish house.

There is no exaggeration to say that Syria is exceptionally rich in antiquities, some of which were brought to light and some are still trapped in dust. These monuments are a wealth for the country and a source of pride for it, but at the same time they were and still are facing the official or officials with enormous challenges: How can all these treasures be preserved? The restoration of all of them requires a volume of spending, not before Syria, as it is a country with limited capabilities and requires very expensive and elusive experiences. Which antiquities are worth preserving and maintaining, and which ones are of minor importance or hopeless, and therefore there is nothing wrong with leaving it or even demolishing it and investing its rubble and the land it occupies? Painful and extremely difficult choices (except for the semi-humans of ISIS and their associates).

Therefore, we can reluctantly understand the fate of some of the monuments studied. Nevertheless, it is worth noting a very important aspect: If an animal must be removed, then the faith weakens that the concerned authorities study, photograph and document it before its demolition (as Jean Sauvaget did, for example, in the case of the king's elite soil before Eighty-plus years). There is more than one example of a failure that is difficult to justify in this area, with great regret.

We come to the example of the Farahi House, which received - albeit late - its share of attention. This Levantine palace remained in limbo for generations, and the nineteenth century only left us two Leighton paintings in **1873**. As for the twentieth century, there is a complete absence of photographs (at least according to our knowledge today) until Dr. Nasser Rabat picked up a number of them in **1984**. The late artist, Marwan Maslamani, took pictures of this house (I do not know its exact date and I think it follows the pictures of Rabat) after it was included in the list of buildings registered as World Heritage by UNESCO in **1979**.



FIG. 151 *Detail of riwaq, barrani courtyard, Bayt Farhi, 1984 (N. Rabbat).*

.Photo by Riwaq Al-Barani (famous Leighton painting)

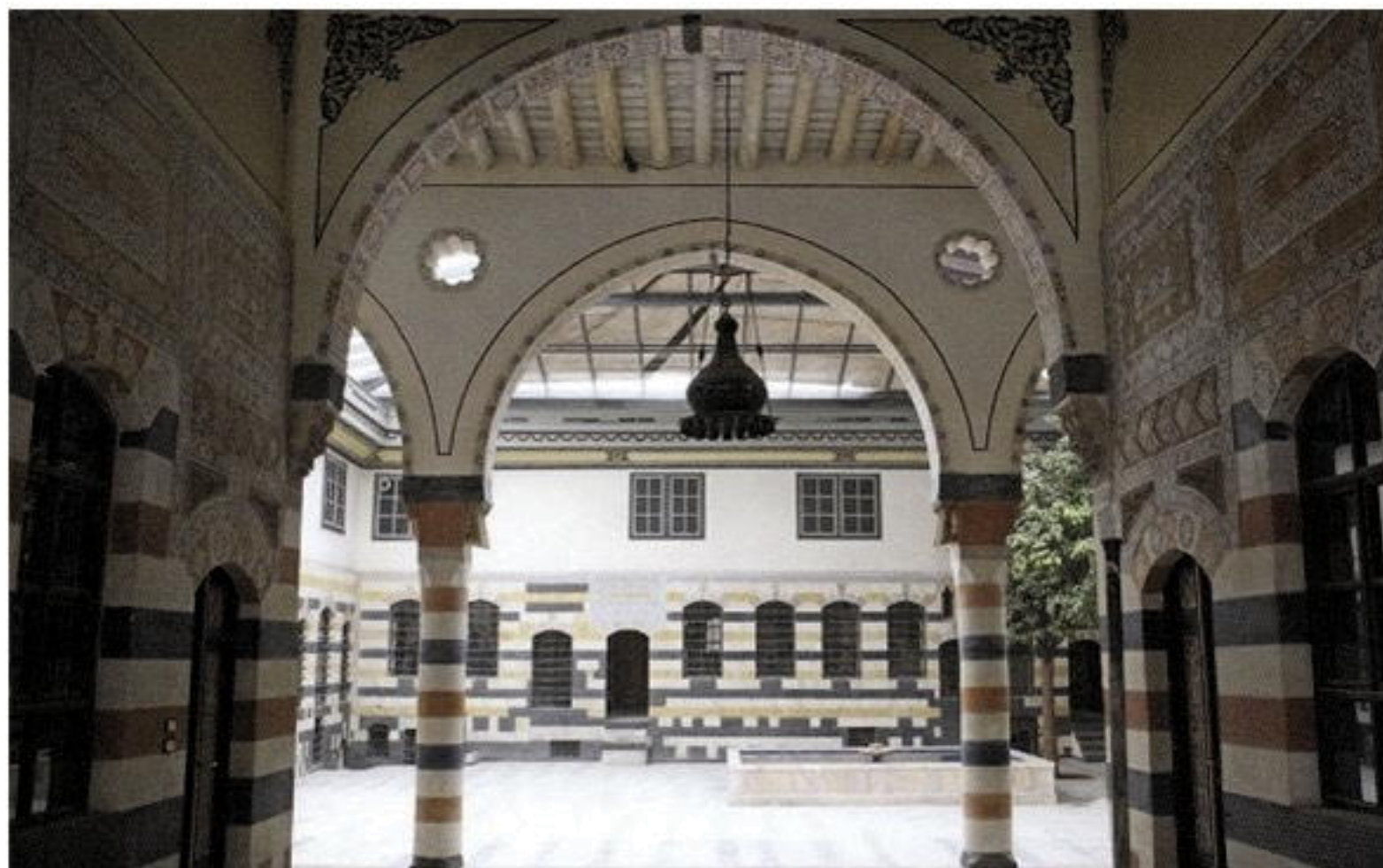
Farhi house .. the lost painting

It is surprising that we do not have historical photographs of the house of Haim Farahi-al-Muallim (the second largest of the Jewish palaces in Damascus after the office of an amber and about a century older than the latter) while we have a fair amount of shots of smaller houses - for example a house for our customers and a house .Nyado Istambouli - dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Fortunately, artist Frederic Leighton left us with his famous painting "Gathering Citrons" of **1873**, where we see .to the right of the beholder the portico that leads to the west iwan to the al-Barani dish

There is a second painting by the same artist from the same date, but it is unknown by the vast majority of amateurs and specialists alike, and we know it only through a black and white picture of it in **Ernst Rhys's** book on the work of the artist Leighton entitled “A Bahra in a Saucer in Damascus” **Fountain in Court at Damascus** . By comparing this painting with modern house portraits (starting from the **1980s**), **Dr. Macaulay-Lewis** concluded that it is also a dish of Barani that is taken from west to east, meaning that it forms a right angle with the aforementioned masterpiece of 'citron picking

So, we have two historical paintings of the teacher's house, followed by a complete silence that exceeded a hundred years before this treasure entered the era of photography. Better late than never



The discovery of Farahi's house at the end of the twentieth century

The house of **Haim** Farahi, the teacher, assumed the forefront of the Jewish homes of Damascus until the middle of the nineteenth century. It is surprising and striking that it was almost completely absent from photographic images at the beginning of the era of photography on the one hand, and the silence of historical records about it on the other hand. This does not necessarily mean that no one has bothered to photograph and record it, as the loss of pictures and documents is not something new in the Near East (invaluable photos and documents were destroyed when the Azem Palace was targeted in **1925**, for example and not exclusively).

The famous French photographer Félix Bonfils left us a large number of pictures with a good amount of Christian and Jewish houses in the Levantine, but unfortunately – or at least what we got from them – they exclude Beit Farahi, which we have only two paintings by **Frederic Leighton (1830–1896)**. The most famous of them was for the year **1873**, followed by an applied silence until **1984 (!!!!)** when those interested took the specialists in his photography, starting with **Nasser al-Rabat** and ending with the German **Stefan Weber**, who picked up a large group between **1997** and **2006** (that is, most of them before the restoration of the house, .which began in **2004**)

So let an ancient Shami family (more details about it and the “teacher” later) of Sephardic Jews (meaning those with Andalusian origins), a handful of its members remained in Damascus until the beginning of the twenty-first century. As for the house, several refugee and other families occupied it in the seventies of the twentieth .century. By virtue of slums and the government confiscated some of it to be forgotten or almost forgotten

The situation changed with the increase in interest in old Damascus starting in the nineties of the last century, and **Hakam Rugby** (an architect born in Syria who lives in Paris) bought **the** house with the aim of converting it into a hotel. Partially renovated my house, then sold it in **2010** to the London – based Syrian businessman **Ayman Asfari**, who continued the restoration until the outbreak of the Syrian tragedy in **2011**. The Asfari family asked Dr. **Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis** to supervise the preparation of a book on the history of the house and its owners whose aim is primarily to introduce it to the hotel's customers. Building. This idea evolved into a .comprehensive study that saw the light in an elegant volume released in **2018**

Farahi House distribution

This house follows the distribution common in all Levantine houses of the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The area of the **ground floor is 2,113** square meters, roughly equivalent to the area occupied by the Al-Azem Palace in Hama. The house also has **a first floor** (it has disappeared and we do not know its original shape) and **a basement** .

The house was built around two main courtyards: the first and most important is **the al-Barani dish** (unlike the Azem Palace and others, where the jawani occupies the pride of place with pomp and breadth) located in the east. The **Al-Jawani dish** is located to **the** west of the house, and there is **a service dish** (kitchen and toilets) in the north. The **three saucers** are painted **green** on the attached model. There are two additional small saucers, one of which does not appear as an extension of the main entrance hallway in the south, and the second .in between al-Jawani and al-Barani from the north

The halls are represented in **blue**, **the** most important of which is **the northern al-Barani Hall**, which takes the shape of a **T**, **and the** door is covered with an inscription in Hebrew. There were additional writings in Hebrew and Aramaic, which, unfortunately, ceased to exist. There is an additional hall in Tazrin, east of Al-Barani, which may have been a **library** or a **synagogue**, as for Al-Jawani, its bubble to the north. The house has many squares and the **square is** a multi-use room smaller than the hall and less lavishly located on either .side of the owls

Colored **iwan** red -**albertqala** as we see our Iwan south in both Goan and Barrani and Ewan West led by a **.gallery** in the latter. Add to the above a fourth iwan, south of the service dish

The main entrance to the house before me leads through a small courtyard, followed by a corridor to the al-Barani courtyard. **The second entrance** is north, leading to the services wing. It was also possible to leave the house through **a special gate** north and west of Al-Jawani leading to the adjacent synagogue (built around the middle of the nineteenth century). It also had **a secret passage** between it and the house of Zabouna to the **.east**, and the traces of its door were erased

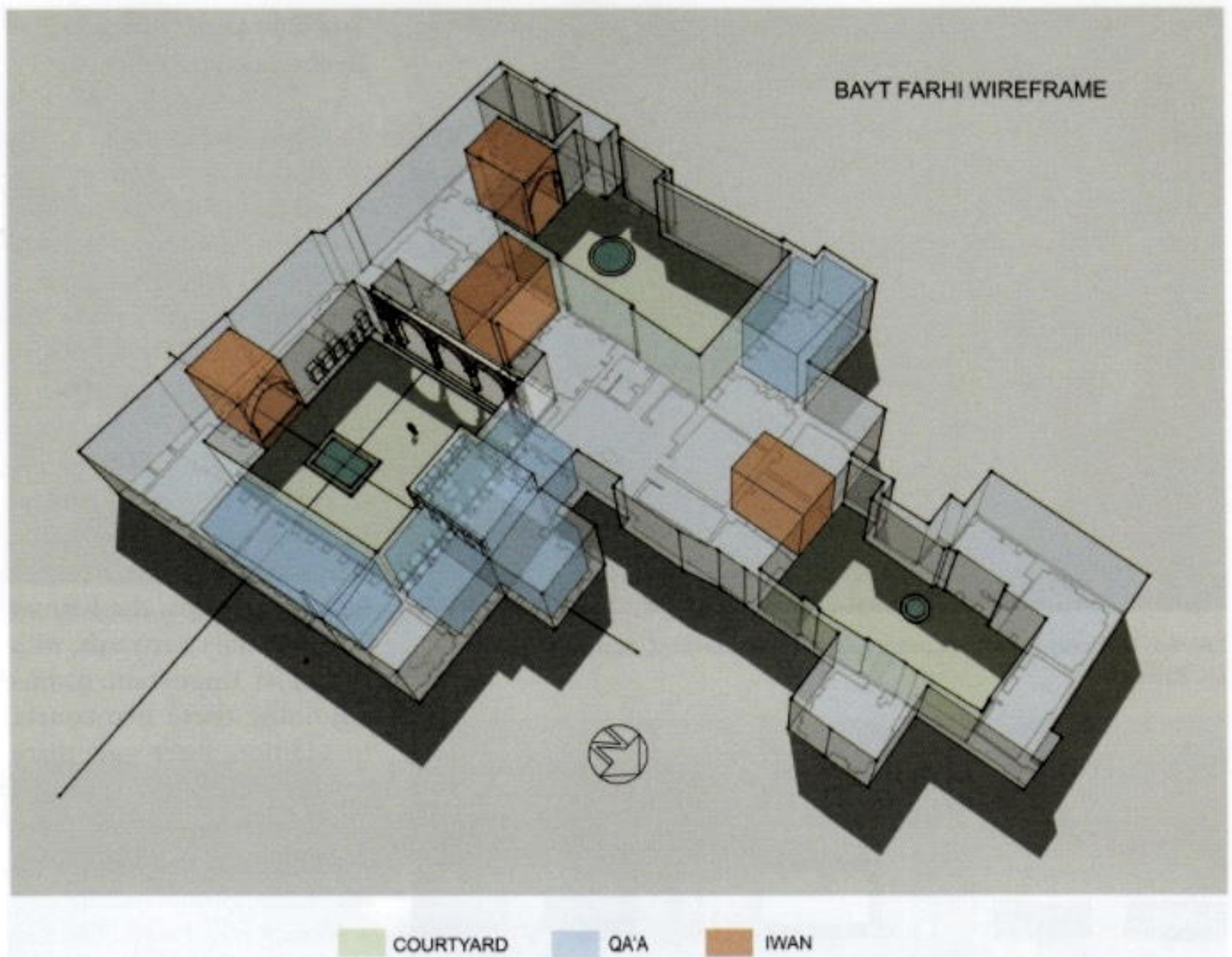


FIG. 62 Wireframe of Bayt Farhi with major spaces indicated by color (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, Building History Project).

Farahi House: the main hall

When entering the arbor from the south, the visitor faces the main hall of the house on the northern side of the courtyard, while the hallway we see in the famous Leighton painting is to the left (the western side).

The northern hall was built in fact in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, and to this period also has its rich decorations, including the ablaqic wall overlooking the courtyard and the plasterwork above it.

The first thing that strikes the visitor in this picture (in **2006**, that is, before the completion of the restoration) is the rectangle inside a rectangle above the door and the Hebrew writing panel in the middle (we have to return to it). The door vault is low, semicircular topped by seven plaster-cast decorative medallions. On either side of the archways are spandrels containing marble and clamshell decorations inlaid with opus sectile.

We now enter through the door to the T-shaped hall with a threshold in the center (**5.06 x 5.54** meters), and with three piers on the sides of the lintel in the east, north and west. This hall was divided into several rooms starting in the year **1970** approximately, and it collapsed in the following decades and its ceiling collapsed until it – along with the rest of the house – was restored at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The northern central belt is approximately square in shape, and its dimensions are **4.83 x 4.88** meters. The Western Tazar is slightly larger (**5.54 x 5.30** meters) and was also in poor condition before the restoration. Its Ajami roof had completely disappeared by the year **2001**. Al-Tazar Al-Sharqi, **4.88 x 5.33** meters, has a door in its eastern wall, leading to a room adjacent to the eastern hall from the north, and a staircase leading to a basement under the eastern hall.

Three ornate arches linked the lintel to the three veils that were reconstructed and painted during a **21st** century restoration. This restoration included the construction of a completely new roof, similar to that of the ancient Ajami Levantine roofs.



Writing above the entrance to the main hall

This Hebrew writing is inscribed on a white marble panel. This panel is surrounded by a rectangular frame of worked stone, which in turn surrounds a space occupied by decorative patterns on stucco molding, and finally a large frame of stone occupied by all of the above.

The Arabicization of the text of the writing is the following (Mr. Ezra Ashkenazi translated from Hebrew into English, and it quoted his Arabization and the book of the Old Testament):

Blessed shall you be upon your entry and blessed shall you be upon your departure (🌀)

Pain will not enter through this door

Neither the elderly, the child, nor the young

Let his will be (🌀🌀) Amen

(🌀) Deuteronomy, twenty-eighth chapter, sixth verse.

(🌀🌀) God's will.

This writing continues as we see the blessings of the owners and visitors of the house, and this type of writing is common in Jewish and non-Jewish homes. As for this particular painting, it was most likely gilded lettering on a blue background.

Dr. Nasser Rabbat photographed this historical inscription for the first time in **1984** when he was in a deplorable condition surrounded by pipes, barrels, sawn washing and wires. The image above is from **2006** after parasites were removed and before restoration.



FIG. 78 *Entryway inscription, main qa'a, barrani courtyard, photographically restored to its original colors (G. Lewis).*

Arabic writings

We were exposed to a sample of Hebrew writings in Beit Farahi (above the entrance to the main hall north of the al-Barrani courtyard) and another to Aramaic (the northern square of Iwan al-Barani behind the corridor). Of course, only the specialist can distinguish between the Aramaic and the Hebrew writing from which the alphabet is derived.

The writings of the Old Testament and Talmud in these two languages are limited to the Levantine Jewish homes exclusively. However, these houses are in common with their Christian and Islamic counterparts in Arabic writings as we see in some wonderful examples executed in the Ajami method in the northern square of Iwan al-Barani (where we found the Aramaic writing) in photographs taken by Dr. Macaulay -Lewis 2011.

It goes without saying that the mother language of the Syrian Jews historically after the transformation resulting from the Islamic conquest is Arabic, as is the case with the rest of the Syrian components. Syrian-Iraqi-Israeli) in the minds of many. There are those who deliberately and premeditated shuffling the cards for specific purposes, as some do when they portray Palestine as a matter of conflict between Arabs (a linguistic group) and the Jews (a religion). On the other hand, many people repeat these fallacies - clichés subconsciously, without any serious attempt to scrutinize what may result from them.



FIG. 97 *Arabic inscription 4, on the wall cornice, pink murabba', barrani courtyard, Bayt Farhi, 2011 (G. Lewis).*

Aramaic Writings

Dr Macaulay-Lewis took the photo of this writing in **2011** (that is, when the restoration of the house was almost complete). The place is the northern square of Iwan al-Barani, behind the hallway we saw in the Leighton painting. The writing is taken from the Talmud, translated by Mr. Ezra Ashkenazi into English, and the :translation of his translation is as follows

Let the eye that looks with hostility be like the eye of the blind who flops his way through the entrance

It is clear that the meaning - even if the wording differs - matches the adage that we have always seen on the top of the hoop-hop buses: "The eye of the envious wears out of blindness" with the rest of the accessories .from the blue eye that mediates the palm, and so on from the creativity of popular arts

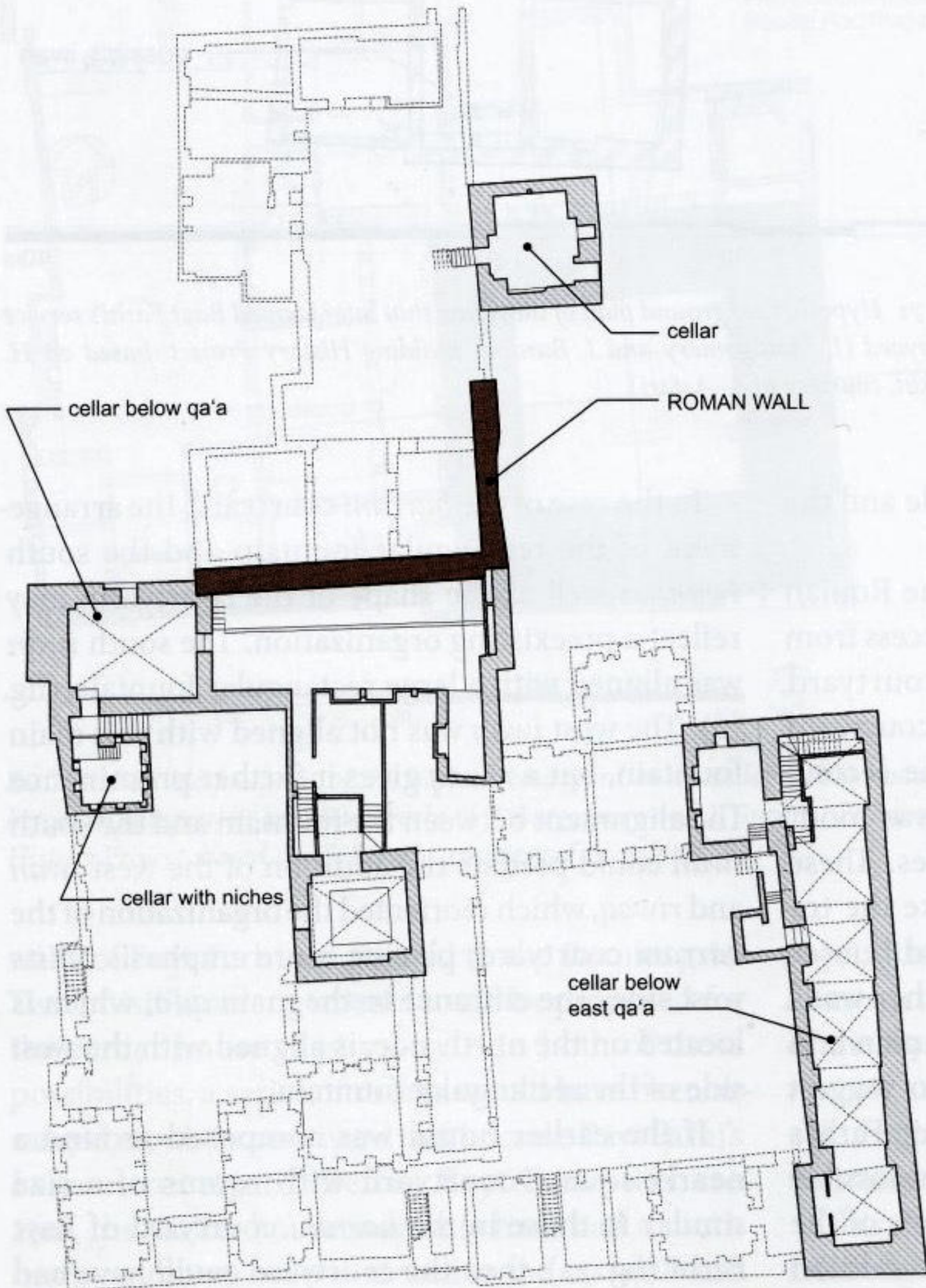
It is not surprising that Aramaic was used as the first language prevailing in the Near East at the end of the first century BC, when the use of Hebrew declined with the exception of study and ritual. It is worth noting the mistake that many make when they view “Semitism” as a race, nationality or religion. Semitic is simply a family of languages (the same as the Indo-European family) and the Arabic most common daughters of this family today and without dispute. Hebrew comes in stages afterwards, and there are tiny pockets of Syriac .remnants (descendant of Aramaic) in Maaloula and elsewhere

:Examples

The word Cohen in Hebrew corresponds to in Arabic: kahin (Aramaic in origin), rabbi = Hakim, “Rosh Hashana” = New Year, “Haolam” the world, and “Elohim” the god. Accreditations are not prepared and are .required by private dictionaries and experts in Etymology or the etymology of words



FIG. 87 Panel 5, pink murabba', barrani courtyard, Bayt Farhi, 2011 (G. Lewis).



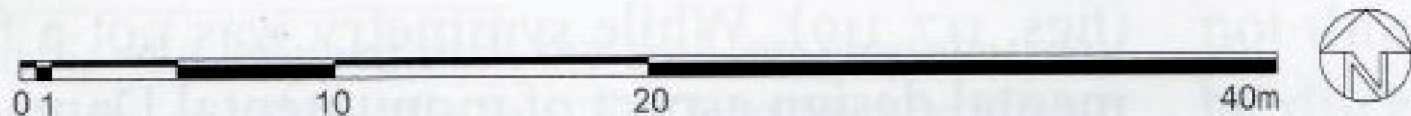


FIG. 70 *Plan of the lower level of Bayt Farhi, with ground floor indicated (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, Building History Project, based on H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).*

The attached photo shows the carved Roman wall stones extending into the foundation of the median nave wall of a Farahi house, toward the west-east (on Weber **2006**). The map shows the route of this wall (the dark .brown color) and the shaded cellars of the house. The ground floor is dotted

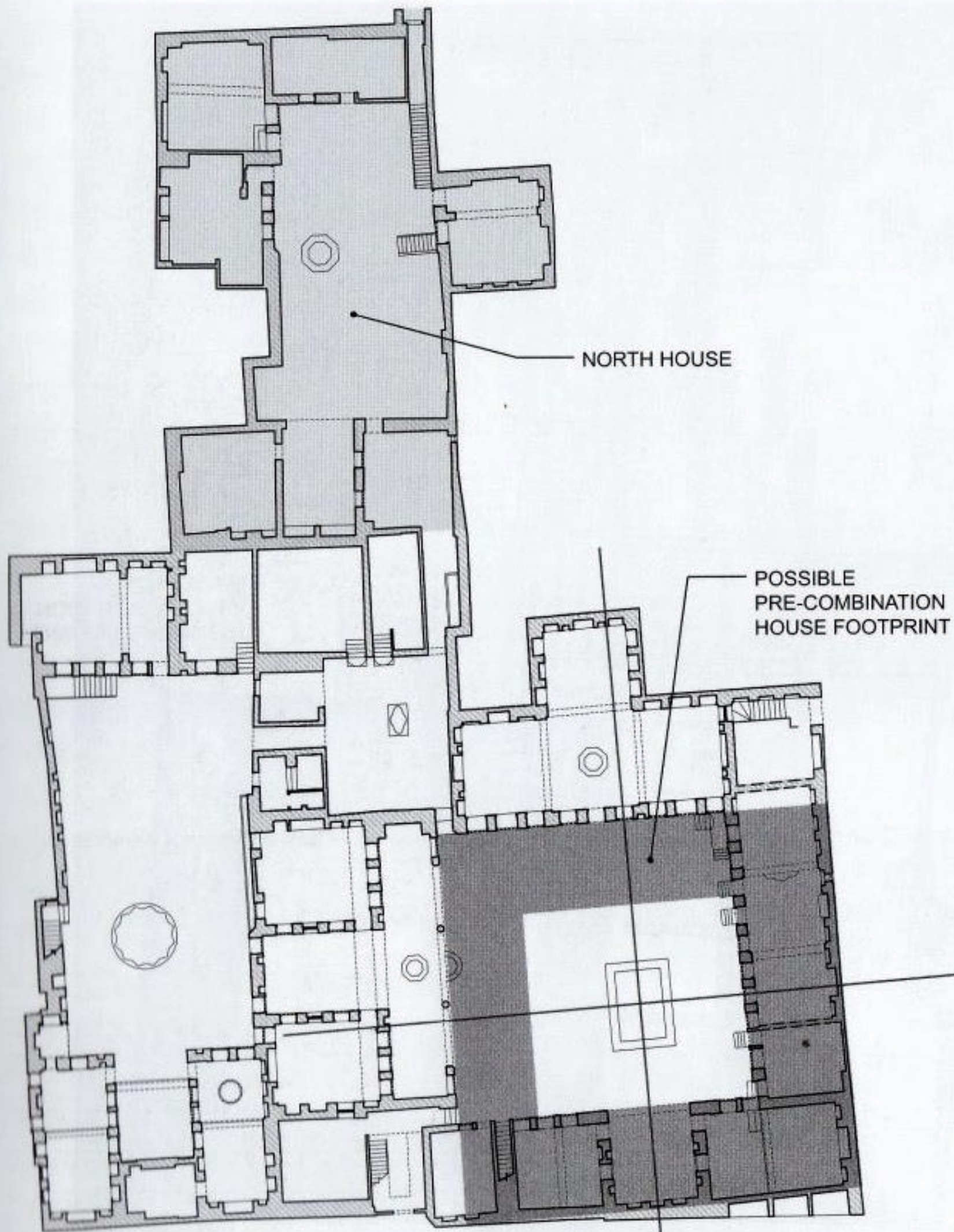
The remains of a Roman wall between the Wasani nave and the service courtyard were discovered during the restoration of the Farahi House. This wall probably dates back to a period ranging from the first century to the third century AD and parallels the straight street in an east-west direction with a south-north extension .beginning at its eastern end



FIG. 68 *Roman ashlar blocks running east–west in north wall, middle courtyard, Bayt Farhi, 2006 (S. Weber).*

We do not have any information about the Roman structure that this wall formed part of its structure, and what we can say is that the remnants of the wall were used in the Ottoman era to draw the boundaries between two houses, one in the north and the other in the south. By examining the plan of **the service** hall and its surroundings, it becomes clear that this part of the house constitutes an independent unit that was most likely an integrated **house (the first house)** with its southern iwan (surrounded by two squares) and its northern entrance, and perhaps it had a hall in the north and west. The dilemma lies in the inability to identify the original structure after adding a number of parasitic rooms in the second half of the twentieth century when .several families inhabited this ancient edifice

A section of the Roman wall was removed when the house was built to connect the Al-Wastani nave with the .service courtyard



NORTH HOUSE

POSSIBLE
PRE-COMBINATION
HOUSE FOOTPRINT

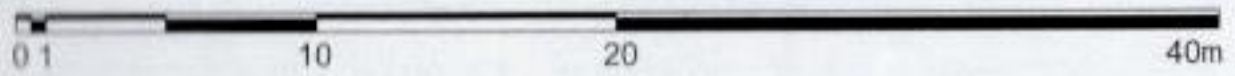


FIG. 72 Possible footprint of the barrani courtyard as an independent house before its integration into Bayt Farhi (J. Montgomery and J. Burden, Building History Project, based on H. Roukbi, courtesy of A. Asfari).

:Pranic dish

We now come to the **bowl of al-Barani** (in the east) and the structures centered around it. This saucer is roughly square in shape, and this may reflect a Roman building at this site which in the Middle Ages or early modern times became a separate **house (House II)** with its own iwan in the south, to which was added later by the western iwan and the gallery in front of it (Leighton famous painting on picking citron). The vault following the Roman chess plan under the east hall supports this hypothesis

Evidence of a **third house** centered around the smaller **Al-Jawani courtyard** in the west is weaker than that of the Al-Barani and services wings. It is reasonable that a house existed in this place before the earthquake of **1759** destroyed it, and there is also the possibility that the land was dilapidated and empty before the family bought it to annex it to the palace. The shape of the long, narrow courtyard indicates that the Al-Jawani site was limited to the borders of the land available for purchase in this place

In summary, the Farahites purchased, collected, renovated and decorated - if not completely rebuilt - two houses, at least one of them occupied the service wing site in the past and the second al-Barani

Under the land of Farahi House

The construction of the Farahi House took nearly **25** years until it was completed in **1805**. The size and distribution of the house indicate that it was built on the rubble of two or perhaps three houses (the collection of several houses in a large palace. Usually spread to a fair degree in old Damascus as in the houses of Nizam, Sa`id al-Quwatli, al-Sabi and Saqqa Amini) Shirazi and others). It is possible that the family purchased the land or lands in the aftermath of the **1759** earthquake on which to build their mansion

The accompanying map of Ross Burns depicts the **Roman** city of **Damascus** dominated by the **Temple of Jupiter** . The presence of **theater** Roman street straight south in the western section of the city inside the wall and we know today by the grace of the work of the Institute Aldanmarkiy- it was built over my house and Akkad Houranieh. The proofs for the temple of Jupiter, the theater, **the straight street** , **the eastern gate**, and **the Roman arch** are decisive. As for the evidence for the **fortress**, **Castrum**, **the hippodrome**, and the **odeon**, **the** evidence is much weaker, and the assumption goes to the furthest limits. The buildings invaded **the city square as a** forum or agora (Rahba Khalid ibn Asid in the Middle Ages) .centuries ago

We now move to the area southeast of Straight Street with an **X** on the map (the location of **Beit Farhi**). Excavations and studies of Weber and Macaulay-Lewis have shown evidence .of anonymous Roman architecture under this house

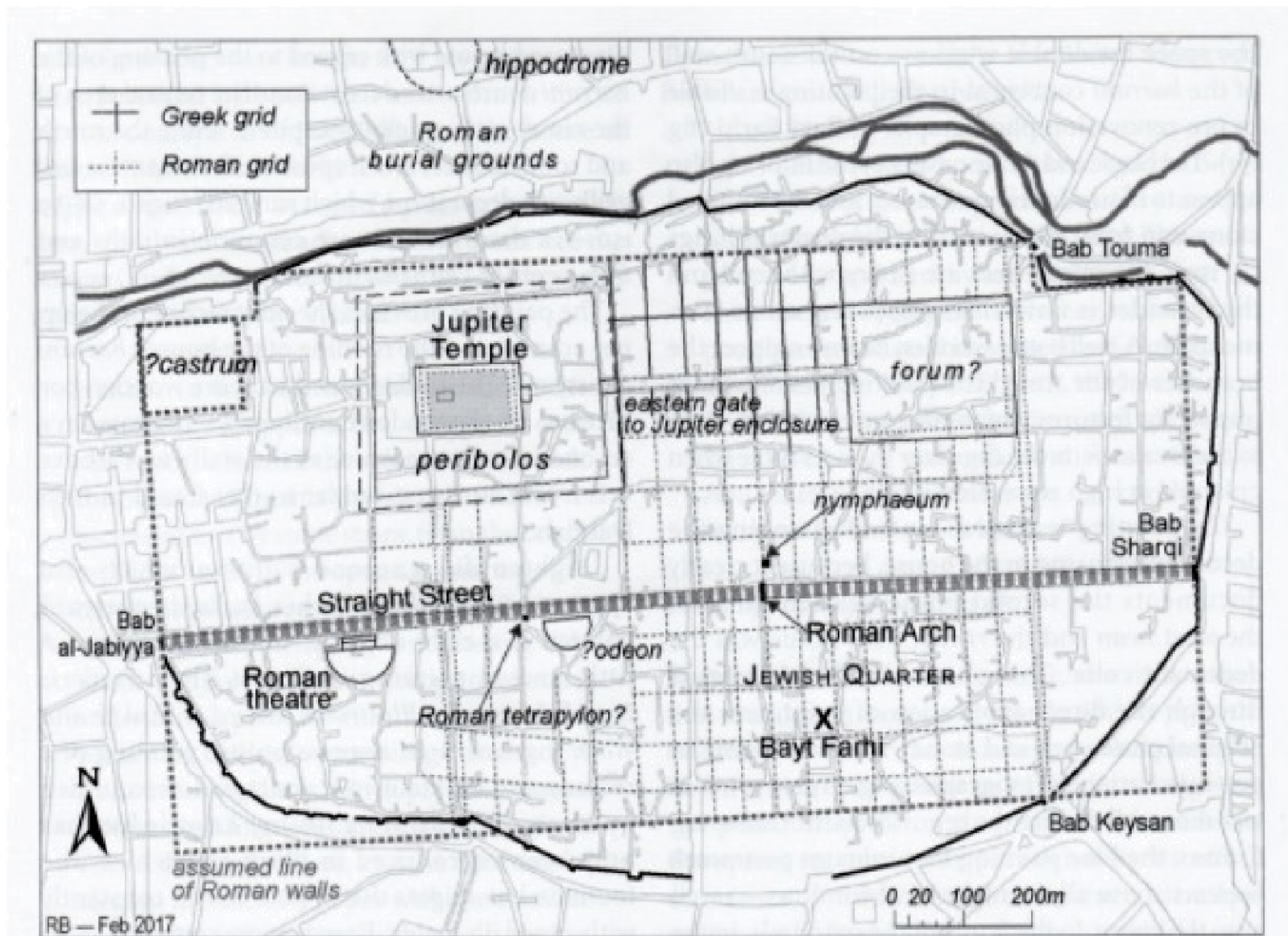


FIG. 67 Map of Roman Damascus, showing the location of Bayt Farhi and Herod's theater, where Bayt al-'Aqqad is located (R. Burns).

The outer courtyard before restoration

We saw that the wild dish in Beit Farahi is more important than the Jawwani – for the extravagance of the latter
.– and it is almost certain that the artist Leighton chose it in his painting in **1873** on this basis

The area of this courtyard (based on the plans of the architect Hakam Rakabi) was **16.59** by **16.82** meters, and
by **1970**, Al-Barani was divided into small, single-storey residential units that were occupied by many
.residents, which led to a radical change in the appearance of the house

These parasitic structures were removed in **2006** or before and, unfortunately, some details of the original
design were removed along with them. Nevertheless, by studying what was left, it was possible to arrive at
reasonable assumptions and a logical conception of the building, with its geometries, decorations, and the
stages that it went through throughout its long history. This study also allowed documenting the changes that
.the house underwent when it was renovated with the aim of converting it into a hotel

.The attached picture is of Weber, dating back to the **1997–1998** season



FIG. 231 *South side of barrani courtyard, looking southeast, Bayt Farhi, 1997–98 (S. Weber).*

Farahi House after restoration: Decorations above the eastern hall door

The attached photo was taken in **2010**, after the restoration, taking into account the old situation as much as possible, based on enlarged digital photos from **2006**

Topped with pastework decorations in the form of medallions holding the main door of the East Hall. Immediately above it, we see two triangles of spandrels meeting in the middle. They are surmounted by a large rectangular frame of stucco molding in the center of which is a stone slab in which there are three small empty cartouches that were repainted during the restoration. It is possible – in comparison to a number of Jewish homes, including the Farahi House and the painting above the door of the main northern hall of al-Barani – that these frames in the past contained writings blessing the house and its residents. These inscriptions are usually .inscribed above the houses leading from the outside (the courtyard) to the large rooms or halls

Similar medallions decorate the arches above the windows and the additional door arch (turned into a window .after the restoration) that we were exposed to yesterday

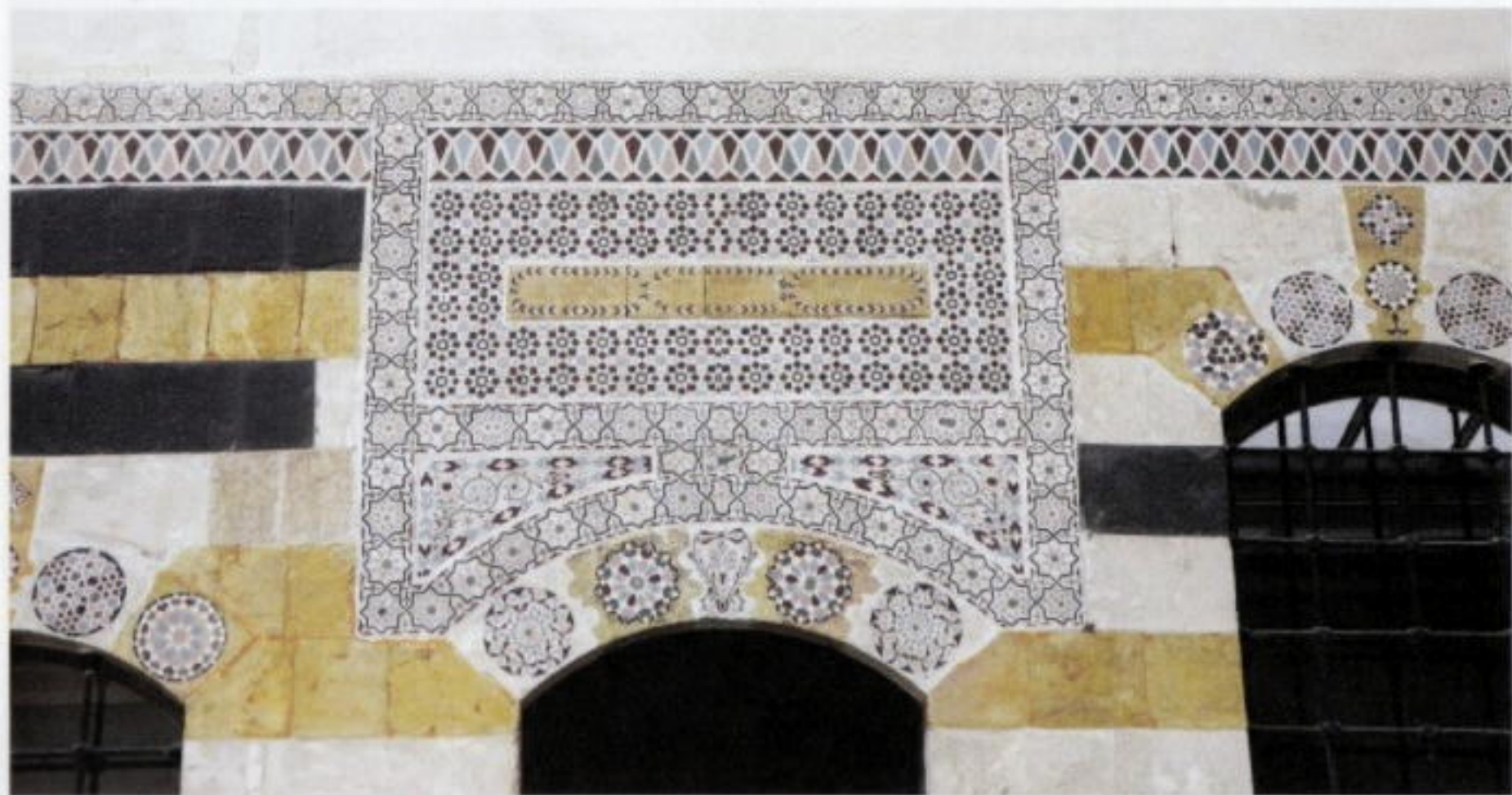



FIG. 221 Renovated pastework over south entrance, east qa'a, barrani courtyard, Bayt Farhi, 2010 (Author).

The Danish Institute in Damascus and the story of Beit Al-Akkad

Douma .. in the Syrian Archaeological Annals of Wasfi Zakaria

Dormitory Office .. Home of the Jewish merchant who turned into a Sultanate school

Short Link: <https://bit.ly/3cnT78H>

Source 

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis. Bayt Farhi and the Sphardic Palaces of Ottoman Damascus. American School of Oriental Research, 2018

Haitham Qadah#

Youssef Farhi#

Jews in Damascus#

Slider#

Jews in Syria#

Ayman Al-Asfari#

Haim Farahi#

Farhi house in Damascus#