# A DISCUSSION ABOUT
# URBAN MYTHOLOGY IN EARLY ISLAM

ANA NEGOIȚĂ[*]

**Abstract**. References about some mythological cities of Islam could be found in the Koranic text focused on moral aspects, especially about the human audacity to build in the real world that city promised by Allah to his fervent followers.

Allusions regarding these cities can be extracted from a whole series of local legends which have generated a massive awareness even in the farthest parts of the Islamic empire during the middle age.

The examples uncovered in this study are selected from a whole series of legends those elements which have been the background for the Islamic vision of the ideal city. The legends mentioned here are renowned (geographically and chronologically) among all the regions of the Islamic empire; they have been modified and continuously rearticulated in accordance with the local traditions. There is a constant nucleus, semantically staged in the formula of a binomial "City – Paradise" (the caliphal city represented as a reflection of the Paradise). This specific typology has been used in the planimetry of the palatine cities.

**Keywords:** *Islam; urban mythology; urban esthetics; urban literature.*

We can recall the symbolic significance of the Islamic city as a cosmogonic projection of paradise in the mundane, we have to mention a unique case of this in the history of Islamic urbanism in '*Dar al-Salam*' (The Place of Peace), the first nucleus of Baghdad erected in 145/762 at the behest of Caliph al-Mansur. The model that inspired architects and astronomers seems to have its roots in some typical cities of the Ancient Orient, cities with strong symbolic meanings in the planimetry (with preference for perfect geometric shapes such as the circle or square, able to express the restoration of the cosmic order); and direct stipulated in the Qur'anic text.

[*] Associate Lecturer, PhD, University of Bucharest, Centre for Excellency in Visual Studies, art curator and art historian, Bucharest, Romania; anamnegoita@gmail.com.

One manner to accomplish the religious and ideal goal of peace on earth is to establish a favorable 'functional', yet deeply symbolic form for its existence – a city. An urban form able to accommodate the social dynamic of a certain population, along with their beliefs, faith, necessities etc. is always, also, symbolic. However, this form may be seen either as a hymn to virtue and harmony, or as an offensive demiurgic aspiration to a realm beyond mankind's 'share'. Both ways are visible in the planimetry of a certain city, generating a complex model for the urban life. At the same time, unquestionably, most of the cities of that time were mirrors of the political ideology, too.

In the description of the Mesopotamian paradise, it is not presented as a garden but in the form of a city, an urban phenomenon, scholars of the Ancient East believe that the description is directly related to the presence of a famous urban centre during that period, Eridu[1].

This city contained the first central temple building, around this central element the 'world' revolved. Eridu was an actual place where the sacred character was underlined but still accessible, in contrast with the biblical Eden considered to be a 'utopian' (place) without any counterpart in real life (the main icon – a typical correspondence – recognized as the 'heavenly city of Jerusalem' as the equivalent of Paradise only occurred later). This specific mythological tradition of oriental mentality had a defining influence in shaping the symbolic image of the Islamic city. The Sumerian city considered to be the oldest urban settlement in Mesopotamia (approx. 5400 BC), was recognized as the centre of worship with a strong regional influence.

The general planimetry of palaces and aulic buildings or bastions of Islam have their roots in local legends whose genesis is difficult to identify, as well as cities which departed from this mythological substrate whose origin is in literature, as evidenced by the existence of different ruins or toponymy. Cities described by poets reflect the aesthetic of urban thinking, their main function in this case consisting of beauty shown in the satisfaction that the human eye absorbs when interacting with the city itself. Often, cities such as Baghdad, Samara, Cordoba, Madinat al-Zahra can be decrypted under many levels of interpretation: planimetric, social, economic, artistic etc. This is a legendary, literary trend which follows the tendency of the Middle Ages to imbue reality with symbolic and mythological elements, and so, to restructure the aesthetic reality by highlighting it. 'The city of poets' has its own planimetry, and this is the effect of ascertaining the process of 'building a town on the intellectual level' (imaginary) using the senses to describe it (in literary productions). 'Imran – The Fortress with Columns' is mentioned in the Qur'anic text as being related to the references of 'the People of Aad'.

The fascination that this city has created within the literary world has generated a series of imaginary descriptions, 'additions' that poets brought to the sacred text,

---

[1] Sumerian city considered to be the oldest urban settlement in Mesopotamia (approx. 5400 BC), recognized as the center of worship with a strong regional influence. See Gwendolyn Leick, *Citta Della Mesopotamia Perdute. La storia, la vita quotidiana, lo splendore e il decline di una poco conosciuta civilita ancora oggi,* London, Newton Compton ed., 2001, pp. 14-38.

based on the summary elements mentioned in the Qur'anic text: "By the daybreak./And ten nights./And the even and the odd./And the night as it recedes./Is there in this an oath for a rational person?/Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with Aad?/ Erum of the pillars./The like of which was never created in the land./And Thamood-those who carved the rocks in the valley./And Pharaoh of the Stakes./Those who committed excesses in the lands./And spread much corruption therein./So your Lord poured down upon them a scourge of punishment./Your Lord is on the lookout./As for man, whenever his Lord tests him, and honours him, and prospers him, he says, "My Lord has honoured me."/But whenever He tests him, and restricts his livelihood for him, he says, "My Lord has insulted me."/Not at all. But you do not honour the orphan/And you do not urge the feeding of the poor./And you devour inheritance with all greed./And you love wealth with immense love./No-when the earth is levelled, pounded, and crushed./And your Lord comes, with the angels, row after row./And on that Day, Hell is brought forward. On that Day, man will remember, but how will remembrance avail him?/He will say, "If only I had forwarded for my life."/On that Day, none will punish as He punishes./And none will shackle as He shackles./But as for you, O tranquil soul./Return to your Lord, pleased and accepted./Enter among My servants./Enter My Paradise."[2]

They described a conceptual city using a literary representation subordinated to a purely aesthetic criteria and this type of discourse was later immortalized in '1001 Nights'.

"[...] Ka`b Al-Ahbar said: "Allah is pleased with him, for as Allah says, Imran, the city with columns appeared to Moses too, where he specified that on its construction Saddad order that 1000 princes of this people of giants, who formed part of the stock of Hud, to go out and look for a place with plenty of water. So they did, and with 1000 people and its army from Yemen they arrived at the mountain of Aden and saw there a plain with many fountains and good climate as king Saddad had asked.

They loved that place so they ordered architects and builders to define a city square of 40 parasang around that place, with each side of 10 parasang. They dug foundations until the water came out and brought stone from Yemen until they reached the ground level.

Then they built a wall of red gold bricks with a height of 500 bends and 20 cords wide. (...) Later, they built 300.000 palaces within the city and in each of these were 1000 columns in emerald and gold, each column length was 100 cubits. Above each column lay slabs built of gold and silver specially designed for gold al-qazars with gold rooms and on several floors with inscriptions made of precious stones and pearls. Along the main streets of the city they made rivers of gold, with banks of precious stones, pearls and emerald in different colours and they planted trees with golden branches, leaves and fruits of emerald, pearls and other jewels. The city had four gates, each with a height of 100 cubits long

---

[2] Qur'an, Surah 89 The Dawn, al-Fajr, 1-30, *The Qur'an: A Translation,* Sayed A. A. Razwy (Editor), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Translator), London, 2009.

and 20 wide, decorated with precious stones and pearls, the city was completely paved with pearls. (...) The city construction lasted 500 years and when it was finished, they went to all corners of the world in search of carpets and rugs, silk quilts and other precious objects to adorn the palaces and houses of Imran – The city with Columns. (...) When all this was over, Saddad walked in the city accompanied by 1,000 slaves in luxurious dresses and other servants, after he left the city, in his place, he put his son Mursid Ibn Saddat to rule as deputy of the kingdom. (...) When he crossed the city, he loved beauty and the perfection that he saw and said: "I did only what Hud had promised me to achieve after my death, I made it in life." But when he wanted to enter the city, Allah sent an angel who cried a sea, killing everyone from the city, instantly all of them fell down crashing."[3]

We have to mention that the main sources used to describe the urban centers of that period come from the literature, whether we refer to purely literary creations (lyrical or cautionary tales) to literary works – scientific (compendia, geographical descriptions, topography etc.) or to travel journals. Starting with the 10th century the practice of pilgrimage fostered the development of a certain type of writing related to its practice. Regarding the urban centers established during the second century immediately after the model was implemented, we have very few references, but we know some fragmentary descriptions of social life and the main buildings. Some of the most important moments during the formation of the cities are specified in various stories or geographic references in the subsequent period.

A very important source of information is a specific type of writing called *Fada `il – Buldan*[4] (evoking places). This genre was extremely widespread in the Muslim world (also influencing occident literature) and encompassed a range of data, facts, stories, often legends of the cities or describing the atmosphere of the most important cities of that time. To illustrate the importance of literary sources in highlighting and characterizing urban typology of the Islamic world mainly offered by three historians: Syrian geographer al-Muqaddas (approx. 945-1000), Persian traveler Khosraw Naser (approx .1075) and the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217).

The city is described using a poetic image, a literary landscape abundant in details that almost allow us to reconstruct it. The focus is on the aesthetic character, in a very specific manner of that period, using a certain literary – narrative stylistic in order to represent the idea of beauty which then was synonymous with luxury, exuberance, glamour, features that are to be found constantly in the aesthetic conception of Muslim architecture. The senses that

---

[3] Rubiera, Maria Jesus, *La Arquitectura en la literatura arabe*, Madrid, Libros Hiperion, 1998 (2nd edition), pp. 45 -46 (our translation).

[4] Fada `il - Buldan, a genre that has generated a real true fashion, the authors' interest was focused on highlighting, exaggerating certain characteristics, merits of places or people (most often the birthplace of the authors) presented in contrast to other regions and communities. It keeps two such famous works Fada `il al-Quds (Jerusalem laude) and Fada` il al-Sham (Syria merits). See: Josef W. Meri *The Cult of Saints among Muslim and Jews in Medieval Syria*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 141-143.

are involved are predominantly visual and olfactory, which clearly substantiate the preference of the high class of Islamic civilization for brightness and the appreciation of perfumes.

The legend of the 'City with Columns' known in medieval times spread in an unprecedented way throughout the all lands of the empire. In the capital there were the famous "translation centres" and this legend has undergone a number of local versions which are referred to in the Andalusian area, involving modifications and additions related to the translator and poet's imagination, One of the most notable references about this fantastic city in the Andalusian area is Nafh Al-Tib's Al-Maqqari[5]

For example, the description of paradise (inspired by ideal models of community and exposed in urban structures especially by the ancient oriental civilization) was part of the synthesis in organizing the urban planimetry (focusing on an ideal plan, this can be easily observed in a symbolic analysis of the urban structure and is very seldom noticed if we focus our discourse on aspects of urban planning as in the modern sense.

Based on these clues different schools developed areas of exegetical analysis in which the city's image was seen both in terms of symbolism and planimetry and these images of the cities reflecting a mundane paradise. In this case, of the city of Madinat Al-Zahra built by Caliph Abd Al-Rahman III al- Nasir, from the middle of the tenth century, we find an atmosphere literally inspired by the decorative murals described by poets as being specific to Iram's city.

These people had the audacity to create in real life what God promised to the righteous, the punishment of the hereafter drew this boldness, as shown in the text, the city remained inaccessible to people. An important trend of Islamic thought is to prohibit imitation of the facts in the real world, things that belong or are strictly attributes of deity; and this is considered more than a simple act of courage, it is regarded as blasphemous.

"Is it they who allocate the mercy of your Lord? It is We who have allocated their livelihood in this life, and We elevated some of them in rank above others, that some of them would take others in service. But your Lord's mercy is better than what they amass/Were it not that humanity would become a single community, We would have provided those who disbelieve in the Most Gracious with roofs of silver to their houses, and stairways by which they ascend/And doors to their houses, and furnishings on which they recline./And decorations. Yet all that is nothing but the stuff of this life. Yet the Hereafter, with your Lord, is for the righteous."[6]

---

[5] Abu Abbas Al-Maqqari (1591-1632), historically known Maghreb special interest shown for the collection of texts and legends of Andalusian and Maghreb space, texts which are added their own interpretations and additions. Through his literary historians could highlight how certain specific topics surviving folk poetry and western areas of the Muslim empire, analyse texts foreground author brings local flavour Andalusian and Maghreb space for some 'literary techniques' thus having access to the repertoire of common aesthetic and taste of the era to which we refer. See François Jeal (ed.) Regards à l'Andalus (15 ème siècle et 8 ème), Madrid, Ruth Editions d'Ulm, 2006, pp. 81-95.

[6] Qur'an, Surah 43, Decorations, az-Zukhruf, 32 -35, *The Qur'an: A Translation,* Sayed A. A. Razwy (Editor), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Translator), London, 2009.

However, both audacity and religion remain fundamentally human traits. The course of history showed various forms of dynamic between these two traits, sometimes they have been in synchrony, but also one was able to limit the extension of the other. The imagined community of religion shapes in a myriad of ways the current community of the faithful men and it is their aspirations that fuel their audacities. The current community dwells the perfect-imperfect city of peace and imagines the community of those who perfectly embody cherished ideals. This is the beginning of their utopias, understood as interfering religious, social and political projects. The way of this interplay and interchange was able to unquestionably shape the planimetry of certain cities, and so the image of the city is unimpeachably mirroring the politics.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Al-Andaluz, Pais de ciudades, Actas del congreso celebrado en Oropea* (Toledo, del 12 al 14 de margo de 2005, Diputacion Provincial de Toledo, Graficas Monterreina, 2007;

Al-Hathoul, Saleh, *The Arab-Muslim City: Tradition, Continuity and Change in the Physical Environment,* Riyadh, Dar Al Sahan, 1996;

Al-Sayyad Nezar, *Cities and Caliphs. On the Genesis of Arab Muslim Urbanism*, in *Contributions to the Study of the World History*, No. 26, London, Green Wood Press, 1991;

Kennedy Hugh, *Storia della piu grande dinastia islamica. Ascesa e decline della corte dei califi (The Court of the Caliphs. The Rise and Fall of Islam`s Greatest Dynasty*) Newton & Compton, Roma, 2005;

Kostof, S., *The Design of Cities, Places*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2006;

Lassner, Jacob, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Text and Studies*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1970, pp. 159-163 (Al-Chatib Al-Bagdhadi. *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages*);

Leick, Gwendolyn, *Citta perdute della Mespotamia, La storia, la vita quotidiana, lo splendore e il declino di una grande civilita ancora oggi poco conosciuta*, Roma, Newton & Compton, 2002, pp. 14-39, 110-138, 231-257;

Levi, C. S. & Stela, L. (Ed.), *Islamic Central Asia and Anthology of Historical Sources*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2009;

Lewcock, Ronald, *Architects, Craftsmen and Builders: Materials and Techniques* in *Architecture of Islamic World,* London, Thames & Hudson, 2002 (2nd edition), pp. 112-144;

Lindsay, James E., *Daily Life in the Medieval Islamic World,* Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2005;

Marcais, W., in *Simposio International Sobre La Ciudad Islamica, Ponencias y Comunicaciones*, Zaragoza, Institucion Fernando el Catolico, 1991, pp. 208-211;

Mathers E. P. & Mardrus J.C (ed.), *The book of the Thousand nights and One night*, New York, Routledge, 1990, vol. II, pp. 530-555;

*Qur'an*, Sayed A. A. Razwy (Editor), Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Translator), London, 2009;

Petersen Andrew, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*, New York, Routledge, 1996;

Rubiera, Maria Jesus, *La Arquitectura en la literatura arabe*, Madrid, Libros Hiperion,1998;

Tsugitaka, Sato (Ed.), *Islamic Urbanism in Human History. Political Power and Social Networks*, New York, Kegan Paul International, 1997.