

THE EVOLUTION OF THE URBANISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN ISLAM – A PHENOMENOLOGY OF URBAN SPACES AND URBAN THEORY WITHIN A HISTORICAL APPROACH

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Abstract. *This study focuses on the premise of the first era of the Urban Islamic Phenomenon, emphasizing the main elements that can be noticed as tools of characterization for a certain type of urbanism.*

The relation between a series of elements, such as norms leading from Islamic law, elements specific to Islamic life during the medieval period, political and economic aspects, local differences and the urban planimetry is seen from a dynamic perspective according to the evolution in different period of the mentioned elements.

The study offers a chronological evolution of the theories about the Islamic urbanists pointing towards the most important methods used by different schools along the history of urbanism. The theory is presented in a synthetical way.

Keywords: *Islamic Community, urban planning, Medina, Quran, Ummayyads, Abbasids, suq, mosque, urban theories, symbolic patterns.*

Early stages of the crystallization and the formation of the new religion occurred in oases in western Arabia. Urban civilization of medieval Islam took as its starting point the urban centres in the first half-century VII: Medina (622), Basra (approx. 637), Kufa (approx. 638), both in southern Iraq today, Fustat (642 – the first urban nucleus of Cairo).

A number of medieval Islamic scholars¹ link the emergence of urban phenomenon to the formation of the first Islamic space garrison towns – the so called Amsar towns, this hypothesis is supported by the fact that the troops of Muslim conquerors took over the organization of these settlements according to a model established by the Prophet in Medina (622). These urban structures that initially had few inhabitants consisted exclusively of members of the military and their families and experienced an exponential increase in both the number of inhabitants soon

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¹ Marcais, W., *Simposio Internacional Sobre La Ciudad Islamica, Ponencias y Comunicaciones*, Zaragoza, Institucion Fernando el Catolico, 1991, pp. 208-211.

after establishment (rural populations in the area have shown an almost constant trend to integrate these cores for security reasons) and an unprecedented urban planimetry of itself. Soon becoming “capitals” of new lands conquered, the regional governor led Amsar sites to develop their own urban typology and in accordance with religious precepts and the behavioural norms recommended for daily lives within these new capitals, city-wide integrated planimetric structures to allow for the practicing of rituals, trade crafts, etc.

A few years after the establishment of the armed forces we find, as a purely literary source indicates, that the cities of this kind had already crystallized a social hierarchy considered typical within Islamic society. During the Umayyad dynasty some centres were preferred such as Damascus and Aleppo located in the Syrian-Palestinian area. During the Abbasid the centre preferred was Baghdad, Samarra in modern day Iraq and in the Fatimids the preferred centre was Cairo-Egypt. All these urban typologies were adapted to the social Geography of the regions mentioned. More precisely the Umayyads established their centres in ex Roman-Byzantine areas and the cities conquered suffered fundamental changes in their urban planimetry. From the incipient stage of the formation of the cities a dichotomy can be noticed, to the ancient thinking of planimetric spaces the Umayyads implemented a new vision of organizing the urban space which consisted of well-defined habitus according to the norms of the Islamic Community..

The Abbasids, however, following a school of thought that promoted the regaining of the purity of Islam as it was at the time of the Prophet, preferred urban typologies and models of ancient oriental inspiration. Old urban centres of Mesopotamia were often taken as models and reimplemented (e.g. The round City of Al Mansur – 762, the first urban nucleus of Baghdad). The Urban Islamic society during the Middle Ages focused on two architectural structures: Mosque – Suq, “institutions” present in each urban centre. The Binome formed by the mosque and the Suq is the fundamental element of urban planimetry to which are attached a number of other building institutions (Hammam, Califal palace) generated a stereotyped² pattern of urban analysis. To define the Islamic city during the medieval period a 2 step methodology was used starting with noticing a theory of elements with general characteristics: a) was to identify this binary in a restricted or extended formula and b) to identify an irregular and unordered character which was in total contradiction with Greek Roman planimetric thinking.

The main sources used to describe the urban centres 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 centres established during the second century immediately after the model was implemented we have very few references but we have some fragmentary descriptions of social life and the main buildings and even more

² Amira K. Benisson & Alison L. Gascoigne (ed.), *Cities in the Pre-Modern Islamic World. The Urban Impact of Religion, State and Society*, London, Routledge / SOTS, 2007, pp. 17- 23.

important moments during the formation of the cities are specified in some stories or geographic references in the subsequent period. A very important source of information is a specific type of writing called Fada' il – Buldan³ (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 we will turn to a series of notes offered by three historians: Syrian geographer al-Muqaddas (approx. 945-1000), Persian traveller Khosraw Naser (approx. 1075) and the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (1145-1217).

All three sources provide descriptions of urban life, both the place of origin of the authors and the places visited, all three examples refer to a “travel diary” and the authors description of their respective pilgrimages to Mecca. From the many sources we have we have chosen only these three with the motivation that all three describe the same urban centres, (with some exceptions.) in different times and they notice the changes that occurred within three centuries. Another reason is that each author focuses its interest in describing a separate series of urban life issues, details of the space morphology, exotic elements, related to accidental facts or various curiosities. Ibn Jubayr details in his visit the main characteristics of the spatial organization of the commercial Centres, the type of commerce they practice, the provenance and the quality of the merchandise, the relation between the commercial, space and the urban space starting with with 966 we have the first reference of the pilgrimage to Mecca of Al- Muqaddas where he carefully describes the city. He will spend the next 20 years traveling so the amount of information provided is very rich. Crossing the Islamic world from Morocco to Pakistan today (Sindh) he realised a series of a series of Fada' il related to each region he visited providing data on topography and climate, agricultural work and handicraft, on trade and social life.

The description of his hometown, Jerusalem is one of the most complete sources regarding the coexistence of Arabs and Christians and the changes that the city has incurred to be able to sustain this type of cosmopolitan society. The way in which Naser-e Khosraw describes the visited lands has a very technical characteristic. This aspect comes from his profession – “civil administrator” of the region of Khurasan. We know that he avoided the major urban centres so in his writings we find few details about Damascus or Baghdad but this drawback is offset by the fact that it stops carefully to describe different caravanserais, the civil and administrative architecture, the public ceremonies. The third author leaves from Granada in 1183 and reaches Mecca in the same year after 8 months and covers in his work the most extensive area we can find in a single author. In

³ Fada' il al – 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.

the next year he travels to Baghdad and visits a number of cities in the Arabian peninsula. He mentions a stop in Aleppo and Damascus, offering a very comprehensive description of what the urban Islamic world at the end of the 12th century looks like, with highly personal references of the impact of the Crusades on the life of the urban centres.

Researchers using the comparative method between urban typology and aesthetic archetypes mention the fact that the installation of the urban prototype in the Muslim civilization involves two phases of development: **a.** the first phase has an unconscious level of implementation and can be noticed in the Bedouin pre-Islamic populations where the settlements should ideally meet a symbolic order of the (divine) hierarchy which have been translated into the Community **b.** the process of Islamization including the establishment of the archetype has been settled as a derivation of some precepts mentioned in the Qur'anic text. 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 (focussing 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 a modern in the modern sense.

*“(Other) faces that Day will be joyful,/ Pleased with their Striving
In a Garden on high, “/ Where they shall hear no (word) of vanity.
Therein is a fountain flowing,/Therein are thrones raised high,
And goblets placed (ready),/And Cushions set in rows,
And rich carpets (all) spread out.”*

Surat Al-Ghāshiyah (The Overwhelming) – 88:8-16

*Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with ‘Aad
[With] Iram – who had lofty pillars,
And [with] Thamud, who carved out the rocks in the valley?
And [with] Pharaoh, owner of the stakes?*

Surat Al-Fajr (The Dawn) – 89:6-10

Based on these clues the Qur'anic schools built 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 reflected of a mundane paradise. One of the most famous scholars of the twelfth century, Abu Hamid al Garni⁴, has a specific interest to identify the equivalent between the Qur'anic text (in the first interpretation of it) and the way that the Qur'anic precepts are reflected in the urban community. The image of the legendary Adit city of Imran represented a way to describe the

⁴ Abu Hamid al Garni – Arabic Scholar with Andalusian origin (1080–1169) combines traditional exegesis type used by Quranic schools “classic” personal reflections and philosophical vocabulary specific data series, the image of the ideal city, as shown in his writings has a profoundly symbolically as a reflection of urban planimetry supernatural hierarchy.

Qur'anic Paradise but also one of the main elements used in the exegesis of the evolution of the urban archetype, the city was often quoted as an aspect of the relation of the symbolic level of the cities.

[... "He will sit in the Hereafter in the Garden of Eden, where they built castles of gold with golden floors also overlapped with flowers, pearls and other floors, all from precious stones [...] but since we have already built in this world a Garden of Paradise as you describe it and I do not need that one promised when I die."]⁵

A Historical Perspective of the Methodology Related to the Study of Muslim Urbanization

Muslim historiography regarding urban issues developed in the first half of the twentieth century when the interest of researchers turned to eastern areas, diversifying the scientific discourse according to various criteria of analysis: an analysis of Islamic society, the analysis of literary sources, geographical, historical, etc. an analysis of style, aesthetics, art history, etc. initially the interest focused on cities in North Africa, belonging to the Eastern European colonies, in areas that could provide information that allow a deeper understanding of Western medieval urbanism and afterwards extending the study to other areas. We are dealing with a series of greater or less synthesis of major cities such as: Cairo, Maghreb Fez, Baghdad, Medina, Mecca, Damascus, Aleppo, etc., descriptions which attempts to synthesize the main characteristics of the mentioned cities. This interest is backed by a number of archaeological campaigns, starting with the '20s-'30s, which revealed the urban structures or first nucleus of some buildings which in time suffered major modifications, in this way succeeded to solidify the whole discourse about Islamic medieval architecture. William and George Marcais brought to our attention specific urban centers from the Maghreb area of the former French colonies, Brunschwig concentrated his attention on the relation between Islamic law and the social evolution during the medieval period emphasizing the impact on urban society and on the way that the urban space was organized. In this first series of researchers we can place Sauvage⁶ and Von Grunebaum⁷ who provided important studies dedicated to Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi areas. All these studies identify specific elements of Islamic urban civilization, elements we can name, according to a methodological view, as classical instruments of research.

Now, first appears the assumption that medieval Islamic civilization is defined in relation to two issues: the emergence and development of religion in the oases of the Arabian Peninsula and the development of urban structures, the latter

⁵ *Simposio Internacional Sobre La Ciudad Islamica, Ponencias y Comunicaciones*, Zaragoza, Institucion Fernando el Catolico, 1991, pp. 57-58 (translated from Spanish)

⁶ J. Sauvage, *Equises d'une Histoire de la Vie de Damasque*, Revue des Etudes Islamiques, 1934, Cahiers IV, pp. 421-480.

⁷ Von Grunebaum, *The structure of the Muslim Town in Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, The American Anthropologica Association, II, 1955, pp. 138-155.

aspect being related in terminology with the Islamic civilization. In the 30s, Marçais identified a number of principles that have facilitated the emergence of urban civilization:

- a. The existence of a population of a Bedouin type which suffered an intense process of settling;
- b. Creating an administrative nucleus: the governor and local administrators;
- c. Establishing rules of behaviour for the Islamic Community according to religious principles stipulated in Qu'ranic text.

To this first methodological phase dedicated to Islamic urbanism we owe the identification and the analysis of the relation between the five pillars of Islam and how they have worked on a social and planimetric level. Now is settled one of the first types of classification, a stereotypical one, of Islamic cities focusing on the functions of the cities in its formation without taking into account the major differences between them (because the subject has a very broad geographical area and timeline).

Brunschwig tried to identify a first relation on the social and symbolic level between the buildings and the urban space, unfortunately he focused only on a single example the mosque, and much later on the commercial spaces. A first attempt to establish a specific planimetric urban archetype in Islamic thought has existed since 1928 (W. Marçais⁸) this was reviewed in 1945 (Georges Marçais⁹), reconsidered in 1957 (Roger Le Tourneau¹⁰) and in 1958 (J. Berque¹¹). This archetype focused on the synthesis of specific urban architectural elements identifying the following structures: a local governor's palace (dar al – Imara, political and administrative headquarters) mosque, shops and hammam, but without reference to their relationship inside in the urban areas.

Previous studies about types of Greco-Roman urban areas which have been conquered by Islam facilitated the understanding of the new formed cities. Sauvage highlights the transformation of the cities in these lands, identifying the most exposed areas in the cities to these changes, explaining through the social behaviour specific to the Muslim community the rules that exert influence upon the Byzantine and the ancient structure of the city. His Case study focuses on two major Syrian centres, Aleppo and Damascus. The methodological discourse includes in the process data provided by archaeological campaigns, elements from the study of mentality and religion, but also from literary sources that have survived until today, sources describing urban life from different centres.

Chroniclers such as Yaqut, Muqaddas are often quoted by Von Grunebaum to support the theory that the urban phenomenon in the Muslim world has experienced unprecedented development even compared to the Western world. Studies of the '50s-'70s have concentrated on highlighting those elements that

⁸ William Marçais, *L'Islamisme et la Vie Urbaine*, en L'Academie des Incriptions et Belles Letres, Comptes Rendus, I-II, 1928, pp. 86-100.

⁹ Georges Marçais, *L'Architecture Musulmane dans l'Occident*, Paris, 1954, pp. 219-231.

¹⁰ Roger Le Tourneau, *The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the XII-XIII Centuries*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1969, pp. 102-113.

¹¹ J. Berque, *Le Maghreb Entre Deux-Guerres*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1963, pp. 131-134.

come from the religious, legal, the history of mentalities, able to provide tools for analysing the urban planimetry. The '60s developed a critical discourse of the theory specific to the '40s in which the Muslim cities were presented as a geographical inventory, considering that such a method does not allow us to understand the evolution of the phenomenon over the entire medieval period. In this time new urban archetypes developed that besides presenting summary elements (buildings, spaces, etc.) as well as mentioning the role of suburban /interstitial space and their relation to the buildings and their impact on the planimetry.

In the '70s A.H. Hourani and S.M. Stern¹² were the first to support the theory that due to the unprecedented extent of the Islamic empire both geographical and temporal analysis are impossible to be focused on a single urban archetype even acknowledging that it supports regional changes. Between the '80s and '90s several urban models were introduced able to depict the social behaviour and the impact of this on the urban planimetry and the specific differences that cities suffered in different regions of the empire in certain period of time.

In the late '70s, perhaps the most synthetic archetype of the Islamic city was developed. In this case the focus was not set on the identification of the structure of the architecture but on the function that the spaces had inside the city, these were considered to be of major importance in generating the dynamic nature of the planimetry.

Wirth developed such a model making a summary of important functions that the city spaces have exercised within the Islamic medieval archetype, managing to establish a dynamic that can be applied to areas with different characteristics, without constraining the physical model to respect the theoretical view, extracting the elements definatory for the synthesis able to give us the information that can characterize the Islamic city during a certain period.

Starting with this theory new approaches of Islamic urbanism are followed nowadays focusing on the importance of so-called secondary spaces inside the general planimetry, also in these new theories the relation between Islamic law and behavioural rules and urban spaces is reconsidered according to local influences.

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