Locating sacredness in early Islam

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Abstract: The article discusses the articulation of sacredness in spatial and topographical terms in the early period of Islam. It scrutinizes the memory of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina and Jerusalem and deals with the possible rationale for the location of mosques in the early period. Finally it discusses the case of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, a good case study for analyzing the rise of an Islamic sacred landscape within the timeframe of the early middle ages.

Medina and the Prophet

The nature of the earliest holy space in the history of Islam is veiled by uncertainty. It is only later written sources that offer a glimpse into its main architectural features. Despite the absence of any direct evidence about the House / Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina during his lifetime, scholars have spilled much ink on this seminal building.[1] There are indeed compelling reasons to engage with the origins of the Mosque of the Prophet. Most important, it raises a series of crucial questions: how (if at all) was the Mosque of the Prophet relevant for the genealogy of the typology of the mosque that emerged later under the Umayyads? Was this mosque considered a purely religious building or a space that could also host secular activities? What models were used to create it?

The founding of the Mosque of the Prophet reveals the complexity in examining such a building; the choice of the site, its acquisition, and the building of the earliest mosque represent stages that might have provided later Muslims with a prescriptive model to follow. By looking carefully at the structure of the passages devoted to the foundation of the Mosque of the Prophet, which were included in the earliest biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, Johns has persuasively shown how the Muslim account is little more than a calque of the Old Testament narrative about the foundation of the Temple of Jerusalem by the prophet David. In both cases a divinely inspired animal selected the place; the chosen land was previously used for agricultural activities; and, after a long negotiation, the prophets bought the land from owners, who were orphans.

The parallel unveiled by Johns is extraordinarily interesting for the light it sheds on the mould chosen by later Muslims in order to cast their narrative about the origins of the mosque. However, it obviously does not help in outlining the nature of an alleged original pattern, which was eventually replicated at a later period when it was time to establish new mosques in the Islamic-ruled territories.[2]

Our knowledge is therefore constrained by what later texts have to say on the topic. Such texts provide information for examining how the past was constructed at a certain moment of history. They do not, however, offer a reliable description of social reality in the early

[1] Creswell 1989; Johns 1999; Ayyad 2003.

[2] Johns 1999.

seventh century. Furthermore, as it will be mentioned below, the particularities regarding the description of early Islamic Medina in later texts have also something to do with the nature of early Islam. From a religious point of view, the early community might have looked different from the form Islam came to have in the medieval period.

A second text, devoted to the so-called "charter of Medina", informs us of another sacred space allegedly established by Muhammad and his acolytes in the city of Medina. It relates details about a *haram* created by Muhammad as a sort of sacred area in the valley in which the city is located. As recently described by Munt, such a sacred space was – or at least is described as – a *haram* in pre-Islamic terms. In other words, it was a space in which the normal activities of the outdoor world were suspended, including harvesting, hunting, and killing.[3] There is no evidence, however, of the erection of buildings or the carrying out of monotheistic rituals within its precinct.

It seems fair to assume that later mosques developed elements of the "original" concept of sacred space experienced by Muhammad (e.g., the pattern of an open space contained within a precinct and the existence of a direction for the prayer). Nevertheless, given the abovementioned evidence, it is inappropriate to speculate on the details.

Mosques in the *amsar*

The new settlements established by Muslims in the conquered territories – called *amsar* in Arabic-Islamic sources – developed from military encampments into towns. The military nature of the settlements and the need to subdivide the space among various tribal groups probably dictated the arrangement of the plan of such foundations. This arrangement is noticeable in the description of early Kufa found in later texts as well as in the layout of the later town of Anjar, in present-day Lebanon. In the former, shortly after the conquest of the area (638 C.E.) a regular road network was arranged, subdividing the city

Figure 1: Plan of the city of Anjar
(after Finster 2003)

into allotments to be settled by each group. As noted by Denoix, textual traditions also say that the mosque was the earliest building erected in Kufa and that its layout was determined by throwing four lances from a fixed point to the four cardinal directions.[4] In Kufa the great mosque was allegedly erected in the very center of the town at the final termination of the two main urban axes crossing the city. Together with the mosque, a *dar al-imara*, house of government, was erected on the qibla side (oriented roughly towards south). The mosque seems to have been erected prioritizing a central position in the urban structure, – as if the very same city extended around it –, and arranged as a place of prayer directly under the control of the political authority.

Anjar in Lebanon, founded in the first quarter of the eighth century, is a very important case since the general layout of the city is visible

[3] Munt 2014, 42–93.

[4] Denoix 2008, 121–123; see also Creswell 1989, 8–9.

today after archaeological investigations. Anjar confirms the military nature of early settlements as well as the application of a regular pattern in the layout of the city. However, the case of Anjar shows how the mosque was not located at the center of the town but, remaining accessible from the decumanus, in the southeast quarter of the city (**Figure 1**). A tetrapylon (a cubic monument opened on four sides), which is Roman in origin, was instead set at the very center of the town in which the cardo and the decumanus intersect. At the same time, the mosque maintained a privileged relationship with the palace, located on the qibla side of the structure. A private passage allowed the local elite to move from the palace directly to the prayer hall.[5]

Both examples suggest early Muslim communities were keen on locating the mosque in a central location within new towns (though perhaps not at its geometric center). In addition, the mosque came with an attached residence for the local elite; its position next to the qibla wall was determined by function and perhaps also ritual considerations.

Al-Baladhuri notes the centrality of places of worship with regard to urban centers. The ninth-century historian, while describing the conquest of Rur in the province of Sind on the Indus river (today Rohri in Pakistan), notices how the local Magian temple stood in the center of the town. He compares such arrangements to other urban sites in which, to his knowledge, Buddhist temples, Christian churches, and Jewish synagogues were standing in the center of towns.[6] Though difficult to assess, it is possible this passage indexes an interest in centrality within early Islamic urban planning.

One also notices that the buildings used as mosques were apparently considered sacred "for the activity that went on", as Yasin has argued with regard to churches in the early period.[7] The state of purity of individuals gathering for the collective prayer made the Friday mosque a separate, special space contrasting with the surrounding urban environment. Indeed, the articulation of the distinction between pure and impure subjects was pivotal in order to define the status of individuals and, consequently, their right to perform prayer in the mosque. Legal scholars' activities explore grey areas between pure and impure to help believers meet their religious obligations. The insistence on orthopraxy and the case studies discussed in the legal texts show the dependence of Muslim ritual development on the Jewish practice.[8] While purity is often simply a human attribute, several traditions suggest that purity can also be an attribute of sites. As in the case of believers, water could be used to transform an impure space into a pure space: both the Prophet Muhammad and the caliph 'Umar isolated water as a means to purify and make pre-existing profane spaces suitable for prayer.[9]

The activation of sacredness within mosques was completed through the ritual of praying together, a weekly obligation that included an invocation to God, a prayer to the prophet and a recitation of Quranic passages. As Becker has shown, the development of a structured collective prayer did not take place overnight and was heavily impacted by the contemporary Christian Mass liturgy, especially with regard to the recitation of the scriptures. An expository sermon, which included both ritual and political elements, followed the recitation of the scriptures.[10] The introductory lines of one eighth-century papyrus contain some instructions for the prayer, including the process by which one makes the gesture of prayer pure, licit, and sacred:

> In the name of God, most Gracious, most Merciful. From prayer there is goodness. The ablution is its opening, the salutation

5 Chehab 1963; Hillenbrand 1999; Finster 2003.
6 Al-Baladhuri, 439.
7 Yasin 2009, 34.
8 Wensinck 2006.
9 Bashear 1991, 274, 277, 279. Christians also sprinkled water on regular houses in order to transform them into purified sacred spaces suitable for prayers (Yasin 2009, 39).
10 Becker 2006.

> of peace makes it licit, and the exclamation of God's greatness makes it sacred.[11]

The text focuses on how to perform a prayer properly – a procedure that was necessary since different perspectives on details emerged concerning the exact pattern to follow. Individual and collective memorial rituals concerning God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the early believers through formulae and Quranic passages made the mosque sacred.

At the same time, existing mosques started to be classified. Narratives slowly condensed around specific mosques, in the effort of both elevating and degrading their status according to local- and macro-regional loyalty. In the case of Qayrawan, in modern-day Tunisia, the status of the great mosque, completely renovated by the Aghlabids – vassals of the Abbasid caliph – was enhanced by highlighting the presumed connection of the ninth-century mosque to the early foundation established by the conqueror of Tunisia, Uqba b. Nafi.[12] In the ninth century narratives on the conquest process were created and circulated. Concomitantly, the mosque, just renovated and expanded, was linked to the hero/es leading the spreading of Islamic rulership and faith in the region. The association of a sacred space with the site of an alleged place of worship and a specific figure of an early period contributed to extending sacrality beyond the activities taking place within and beyond the communal gathering of people. This situation eventually led to the site becoming a (local) pilgrimage destination.

In other instances, narratives attached to mosques served either to delineate a hierarchy among sacred spaces or to emphasize one sacred space at the expense of others. As shown by Haider, Kufa is a case in point.[13] With the passing of time, the city of Kufa rapidly expanded and grew in size and population. The city had a Friday mosque but also smaller tribal or neighbourhood mosques routinely used by sub-communities in the city. In light of the increasing sectarian tendency within Muslim communities, both the rituals in each mosque and the association of specific figures with a place of prayer helped to distinguish them. Traditions circulating within Muslim communities shaped perceptions of particular mosques, so that some mosques attained a higher social capital than others. This situation also led to the idea that some mosques were "blessed," while others were "cursed".

Finally, as time progressed, a place of prayer was considered to be a Friday mosque if it had a mihrab (i.e., a pulpit), from which the political affiliation of the city to a given ruler was announced weekly during the *khutba* (sermon). From a juridical point of view it was exactly the presence of a Friday mosque that made a settlement a city.[14] The act of allegiance to the ruler preserved in subsequent generations another non-religious dimension of the mosque. It served a secular function in which political issues were discussed and leaders gathered together.

Mosques in conquered cities

Despite the importance of newly founded towns in early Islam, large Muslim communities also settled within existing towns. Such inherited towns had populations consisting of large non-Muslim majorities. These non-Muslim communities maintained their own places of worship, a social circumstance that certainly impacted the building of Muslim places of worship. Given the importance of the Syrian region in the early period and the monotheistic context out of which early Islam emerged in the seventh century,[15] Bilad al-Sham (the geographical area approximately covered today by the modern states of Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and

[11] Malcyzcki 2012, 44. For another papyrus that keeps track of the development of the praying ritual, see Sijpesteijn 2015.

[12] Creswell 1989, 315316.

[13] Haider 2009, 163–68.

[14] Johansen 1981.

[15] It is impossible to summarize the bibliography on the nature of early Islam and the development of Islam into a separate and distinct community during the seventh century. For a recent overview of this complex process, see Donner (2010).

south-east Turkey) provides a useful range of case studies.

The Christian-Arab author Peter of Bayt al-Ras provides useful insight into the sacred landscape that early Muslims inherited in Syria and Palestine. Peter of Bayt al-Ras lived in the ninth century and was from Capitolias, a city located east of the Jordan River. He discusses twenty-eight sites that commemorate the life of Christ, understanding them to be "repositories of the relics of Christ and places of His sanctification".[16] These places were not restricted to the Holy Land, but included locales in cities, such Edessa and Constantinople. He also mentions an additional twelve holy places related to Prophetic figures; all such buildings were described as belonging to those who believe in Christ and were active pilgrimage destinations in his own days. During pilgrimages, holy sites were bustling with believers from nearby cities and villages. The tenth-century geographer al-Muqaddasi explicitly says that Muslims integrated into their calendar holy Christian feasts such as Easter, Pentecost, and the Nativity.[17] Muslims acknowledged the relationship between Christian sacred time and the dynamic and active Christian holy sites. Christian seasonal fairs, which took place during the celebrations of saints' days at main sanctuaries, were, as shown by Binggeli, still active during the early medieval period.[18] The earliest fairs attached to a Muslim holy site were those established for commemorating the Companions of the Prophet, namely the elite group that carried out the seventh-century conquests. A systematized commemoration of the Companions, however, only started with the tenth century.[19]

With regard to the establishment of mosques within existing towns, it is necessary to outline two chronological phases. The first phase is confined to the seventh century: it was a time during which early "Muslims" (or "believers" if one accept Donner's interpretation of seventh-century Islam) were but a tiny minority and had not yet definite rules about how and where to build mosques. Though it is likely that some places of worship were erected by the new ruling community (non-Arab-Islamic sources confirm this point), there is no direct material evidence of mosques dating to the seventh century. Arabic-Islamic written sources do in fact describe early mosques, including alleged cases in which churches were converted into mosques; however, these sources adopt a medieval perspective in which later traditions about the buildings were mapped onto earlier periods. This anachronistic character of the sources, which requires scholars to disentangle several layers of interpretation, raises significant questions about their usefulness for reconstructing the nature of seventh-century mosques in social reality.[20]

The second phase starts with the rule of 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) and expands under the following caliphs, most notably but not exclusively under al-Walid I (705–715). Beginning in the late seventh century, almost every city was provided with a congregational mosque.[21]

Muslims during this second phase seem to have adopted a variety of approaches to their congregational mosques. Unfortunately, the later accounts of the conquest process have little to say in this regard. It would seem that Muslims granted the property of existing places of worship to non-Muslim communities in exchange for taxation and loyalty. It remains unclear if conquerors and representatives of conquered cities stipulated in their alleged treaties the requirement to build mosques. It is even less certain that specific spaces were allocated for such purposes. Presumably, the new rulers made use of abandoned ruins and

16 Eutychius, vol. 1, 134–62; vol. 2, 166–207. According to Griffith (2009, 82), the text has been misattributed to Eutychius, the tenth-century Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria. By contrast, this text should be ascribed to Peter of Bayt al-Ras.

17 Al-Muqaddasi, 182–83.

18 Binggeli 2012.

19 The emergence of the practice of commemorating the Companions of the Prophet has recently been addressed by Nancy Khalek (see, for instance, Khalek 2014).

20 Guidetti 2016, 13–30.

21 Bacharah 1996.

other pre-existing structures (e.g., squares, roads, and buildings belonging to the former ruling elite) in their construction projects.

Norms regulating the status of dhimmi (monotheistic) communities under the Islamic rule are to be found in the so-called "Shurut 'Umar" (conditions of 'Umar), a legal formula, canonized in a rather late period and collecting norms enforced starting with the early period.

One thirteenth-century version of the "Shurut 'Umar" reveals a few details on how to integrate mosques into a dominant Christian urban landscape. Referring to the geographical area of Syria the text says:

> It will be possible for me (the caliph 'Umar) to take (the portion) of the qibla of the precinct of their churches for the mosques of the Muslims because these are in the center of the cities.[22]

This passage describes a phenomenon that material and textual evidence show was rather common during the early medieval period: the establishment of a mosque in the area in which a late antique church (often the Great Church of a given city) was located.[23] This process implies both the preservation of a functioning late antique sacred space, which is relevant for the local Christian community, and the nearby addition of a separate place of prayer for Muslims. While in some cases the mosque was added within the precinct of the late antique church (in an empty space or over non-consecrated structures of the church), in other instances a plot of land was accommodated within close proximity to the enclosure of the church (or nearby the church if the enclosure was absent). The mosque was oriented toward the qibla (south in Syria). As a result, Muslim builders established a perpendicular relation with extant churches, typically oriented eastward.

Late antique churches were therefore generally preserved and Muslims, who might have attended some of them for the sake of an individual act of devotion, did not convert them into their places of prayer.[24] The above-mentioned passage from one version of the "Shurut 'Umar" adds that churches were also appreciated for their position, raising again the issue of centrality mentioned above with regard to newly-established towns.

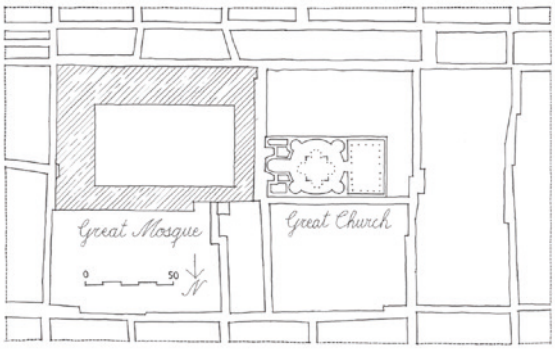

Figure 2: The late antique church and the early medieval great mosque in the city of Aleppo (after Guidetti 2016)

Aleppo and al-Rusafa reflect a similar arrangement – though with important variations. For approximately four hundred years (715–1124), the mosque in Aleppo stood attached to the late antique Great Church of the city, only divided by a narrow lane. The eastern portion of the church was a few meters away from the western side of the mosque precinct wall (**Figure 2**). The outstanding minaret erected in the eleventh-century (and destroyed in the year 2013) in the northwest corner of the mosque not only towered the urban space, it also dominated the nearby church. This arrangement demonstrates that Christian space was eroded, first by the building of the mosque in the eighth century on top of subsidiary church buildings and later with the erection of the minaret. At the same time, it also shows how the mosque did not

[22] Gottheil 1921, 390.
[23] Guidetti 2016, 41–63.
[24] It should also be noted that late antique cities had a variety of basilicas and Christian sacred spaces. It is also possible, therefore, that Muslims only used churches that local Christians had already abandoned. The Church of the Kathisma, located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, is the only Christian structure transformed into a Muslim place of worship during the eighth century (Shoemaker 2003; Avner 2006). It should be stressed, however, that, in light of its size and octagonal plan, this church was not converted into a mosque.

replace the church. The church only disappeared in the twelfth century when the church was first converted into a mosque and later into a madrasa (Madrasa al-Halawiyya).[25] In al-Rusafa the intimacy between the two places of worship is even more accentuated: from the foundation of the mosque in the second quarter of the eighth century until the abandonment of the city in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century, the two buildings flanked one each other, being divided only by a courtyard in which both the church and the mosque had access from their respective prayer halls. In the case of al-Rusafa, the qibla wall of the mosque (the southern wall) was oriented towards the Complex of St. Sergius, a holy place that had been the focus of transregional pilgrimage activities since the late antique period.[26]

The various portraits of closeness and contiguity between churches and mosques during the early medieval era imply that the church structure was relevant to the mosque. Muslims and Christians interacted with one another on various practical and municipal matters. What is more, conversion to Islam seems to have been a multi-generational process that involved exposure to aspects of both traditions. In light of such cultural contacts, it seems reasonable to conclude that the "sacredness" of an existing Christian church figured into the contiguous mosque.[27] In fact, al-Muqaddasi says that the al-Aqsa Mosque is superior to the Great Mosque of Damascus because of the qualities of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In other words, in the mind of this tenth-century Muslim author from Jerusalem, the aura of beauty and sacredness of the Holy Sepulchre was transferred to the al-Aqsa mosque.[28]

As I noted above, the choice of the location of the mosque within a conquered town followed a variety of patterns. In addition to "religious" considerations, commerce and trade seem to have proved relevant in this matter. In this vein, mosques were often built within economically thriving areas of the cities. This pattern comports with the evidence of several refurbished or newly-established market areas dated to the early period of Islamic rule.[29] Palmyra and Jerash are two notable cases in which the early mosque was established nearby a market place, which was renovated under the Umayyads.[30]

Medina after the Prophet

Recent literature on early Islam has underscored how the Hijaz and its holy places were sanctified starting with the late seventh – early eighth century.[31] Such a process means that sites that held importance for the (new) account about Islamic origins were "re-discovered" and that narratives attached to them were circulated. This process, especially pertaining to the words and actions of Muhammad in Mecca and Medina, provided early Muslims with a sacred land (the Hijaz) dotted with places more special than others. The Christian holy land encountered in Syria and Palestine found a replica in the Arabian Peninsula and sites, such as those Peter of Bayt al-Ras described, wherein activities Christ carried out in Palestine were transferred to the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina. The time lapse between the "beginnings" and the emergence of a separate and clear-cut Muslim holy land is not surprising. After all, Palestine became a holy land for Christians only starting with the fourth century, when sites were "re-discovered", pilgrimage intensified, and Christian places of worship were erected in order to commemorate its sanctity.

Munt has recently studied this process in Medina.[32] Munt makes the argument that,

25 Guidetti 2015, 19–24. Of course, some material from the churches remained in situ within the Muslim building that replaced it.

26 Sack 1996; Key Fowden 1999.

27 Guidetti 2016, 81–84.

28 Al-Muqaddasi, 168, footnote h.

29 Foote 2000.

30 Palmyra: Al-As'ad and Stepniowski 1989; Genequand 2008. Jerash: Walmsley 2003; Simpson 2009.

31 Shoemaker 2011, 241–260. This sanctifying process took place after a nebulous period during which Medina and Mecca might have actually been the primary focus of what later Muslims came to define as the early Muslim community.

32 Munt 2014.

beginning with the scholar Ibn Zabala (d. 814), local histories of Medina emphasized the sanctity of the city and its surroundings not only by drawing on actual, existing places and objects but also by adding sites on a virtual map of contemporary Medina. This literature placed an emphasis on the figure of Muhammad and his Companions, starting with the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina (and the myriad of locales considered important because commemorating figures and events associated with it). It also expanded, with some nuances according to each historian, beyond the main mosque of the city.[33]

Medina and its Great Mosque rose in importance with al-Walid I (705–715), who was apparently the first to invest a substantial amount of money in the refurbishment of the mosque. The Mosque of the Prophet was rebuilt and enlarged in accordance with the aesthetics that the Marwanid line of the Umayyad family had developed in the Syrian region; this development began with ʿAbd al-Malik's Dome of the Rock. Marble veneer slabs covered the lower section of the walls, and glass and gold mosaic tesserae, depicting both inscriptions and a landscape similar to those visible in the western portion of the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Damascus, encrusted the upper area of the walls.[34] Perhaps more important for the present discussion is that the mosque's sanctity was enhanced in those very years by stressing the presence of the Tomb of the Prophet within the building as well as the Makam Jibril (a spot commemorating the activity of the angel Gabriel in the revelation process located by one of the gates of the mosque) (**Figure 3**). Such building activities and the accompanying rituals triggered a rather severe wave of criticism (including, as suggested by Munt, the emergence of a hadith tradition opposing to the veneration of burials). This situation shows how the beginning of the eighth century marked a turning point in the perception of the mosque as one of the centers for Muslim devotion. Since the early eighth century other sites too came to be commemorated and associated to the figure of Muhammad. In fact, this process increased to the extent that, by the time of Ibn Zabala (d. 814), twelve other places of prayer in the proximity of Medina were said to memorialize events related to the life of Muhammad. One such place was related to a stone over which the Prophet allegedly seated – a site that was believed to be beneficial for those who had difficulty conceiving.[35] Other benefits were later granted to those who performed prayers by specific columns within the Mosque of the Prophet; such columns honored events and persons of the time of the origins. While the overall commemorating of sites seems to have emulated the contemporary Christian landscape in the (Islamic) lands of Syria, the attitude toward stones as perceived surrogates of relics seems to have worked in dialogue with the power Christians within the Islamic realm attributed to specific natural and carved stones (such as rocks and marble columns).[36]

The ritual of pilgrimage to Mecca developed over time and provided Muslims with a new holy center, which was different than those of other monotheistic communities.[37] Although it is likely that pilgrims travelled Mecca in earlier periods, it is only from the time of the Marwanids (late seventh century) that the Hajj became a community yearly enterprise. At that moment the community celebrated a collective, sacred commemoration and coalesced around its leader, the caliph.[38]

Visitations of the pious to the Muslim holy land followed the dissemination of traditions and reinforced the commemorative nature of specific locales. More and more figures were included into an Islamic sacred landscape that, by the time it also integrated the early Companions of the Prophet, it extended its reach to the territories outside the Peninsula. In these territories, the deeds of such figures and their burial places were recorded and commemorated. As a result, the faithful had created

[33] Munt 2014, 94–101.
[34] Creswell 1989, 43–46.
[35] Munt 2014, 103–115.
[36] Guidetti 2016, 152–155.
[37] Hawting 1993.
[38] Sijpesteijn 2014.

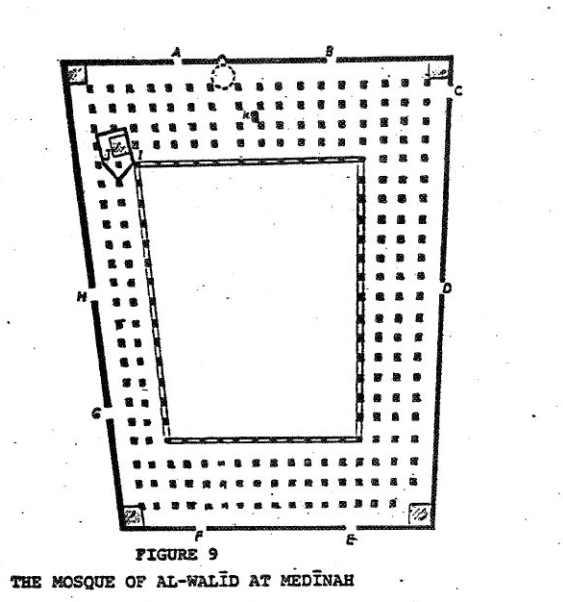

Figure 3: Hypothetical plan of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina under al-Walid I (705–715) (after Gh. Bisheh, The mosque of the Prophet at Madinah throughout the first century A. H. with special emphasis on the Umayyad Mosque, PhD Harvard University, 1979, fig. 9)

a network of sacred places that served as an alternative to the well-established Christian pilgrimage networks rooted in late antiquity.[39]

The Prophet and Jerusalem

While the evidence suggests that the memory of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina took root only by the beginning of the eighth century, the role of Jerusalem within collective Islamic memory of Muhammad and its acolytes seems to have played a pivotal role from the very beginning. As I mentioned above, recent research is increasingly disclosing the complex nature of the community gathered around the Prophet Muhammad. The early community – or the "community of believers," as Donner puts it – was structured around a strict monotheism and belief in God, the role of prophets in delivering God's message, the importance of Scriptures, and the conviction that the Last Judgment was imminent.[40] This early core of beliefs and religious practices was shared with other traditions during the seventh century, eventually forming the main concepts of a distinct and separate Islamic faith during the late seventh and early eighth century. The eschatological belief that the Last Judgment was about to happen helps explain the sacredness of Jerusalem in the early period.[41] Early Muslims probably held the belief that al-Sirat, the bridge that according to the Quran leads to al-Sahira (i.e., the place at which mankind will be assembled on the Last Day), was located in Jerusalem and connected the Temple Mount with the Mount of Olives. These Muslims also believed that al-Sahira was located on the Mount of Olives (**Figure 4**).[42]

Rosen-Ayalon has stressed the link between the belief in the impending Last Judgment and the building of the Dome of the Rock, erected by ʿAbd al-Malik in the year 691. According to Rosen-Ayalon has noted this relationship especially as it relates to architecture and decoration of the Dome of the Rock, an interpretation that Grabar has also subsequently argued.[43] Apart from early traditions about Jerusalem and the iconographical program of the mosaics within the Dome of the Rock, the inscriptions on the interior of the octagonal building erected on al-Haram al-Sharif also point in this direction, as Muhammad is presented as intercessor on the Last Day. In fact, the *isra*' and the *miʿraj* – the terrestrial journey from al-Haram to the farthest mosque and the celestial journey from al-Haram to the gate of Paradise respectively – were associated to Jerusalem, which was interpreted as the point of arrival of the *isra*' and the point of departure of the *miʿraj*. Before this association was accepted and disseminated as one of the "functions" (and therefore meanings) of the Dome of the Rock, the profile of Muhammad might have been connected with the Rock by virtue of his eschatological role on the Last Day. Indeed, while the inscriptions never mention the *isra*' or the *miʿraj*, they do

[39] On the Companions and their burials, see footnote 19.

[40] Donner 2010, 56–82.

[41] Shoemaker 2011, 219–240.

[42] Elad 1995, 141–144; Livne-Kafri 2006; Shoemaker 2011, 236–240.

[43] Rosen-Ayalon 1989, 46–62; Grabar 2006, 53–58, 116–117.

Figure 4: The Mount of Olives seen from al-Haram al-Sharif, Jerusalem
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13424, n. 72)

in fact stress Muhammad's role as leader of the believers on the Last Day.

Before treating the centrality of Muhammad in the inscriptions at the Dome of the Rock, it should be noted that the Dome of the Rock was an ambivalent building in early Islam. Probably reflecting the thoughts of the caliph 'Abd al-Malik and his entourage, the Dome of the Rock was, on the one hand, the logical outcome of the early period: it was a late antique martyrion, decorated with marble columns, marble veneers, and glass and gold mosaics. The Dome of the Rock, therefore, reflects early Muslim appropriation of Prophet Solomon's legacy, the inclusion of Christians and Jews among the recipients of the new message, and the acceptance that Jerusalem was the city in which the Last Judgment was about to take place. On the other hand, however, its Kufic inscriptions announce a new era, with quotations taken from the Quran and the emphasis on two emerging aspects that accentuated the creation of a separate Muslim identity. The latter mainly deal with the exceptional role of Muhammad among the other messengers and the human nature of Jesus.[44] These two points formed the basis for the parting of Islam from other monotheistic traditions.

Jesus is the protagonist of the inscriptions on the inner face of the intermediate octagonal wall, which divides the outer ambulatory from the inner one of the Dome of the Rock. Muhammad, however, plays a dominant role in the exterior face. Jesus is said to be a messenger of God, a prophet, whose human nature reaffirms the unity of a non-generated and non-generating God. By contrast, Muhammad is depicted as the last prophet, whose acknowledgment is quintessential within the horizon of the forthcoming Last Judgment.

> Inner face: …"The Messiah Jesus son of Mary was only the Apostle of God and His word, which he cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. … The Messiah would never disdain to be God's servant, nor would the closest angels; whoever disdains His service/worship and is arrogant, He will gather them all to Himself. O God, bless Your apostle and Your servant Jesus son of Mary; may peace be upon him on the day he was born, and the day he will die, and the day he will be resurrected alive. Thus is Jesus son of Mary, a statement of the truth that they doubt. It was not for God to take a son, glory be to Him."[45]
>
> Outer face: …"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: there is no deity except God, alone, He has no partner. Sovereignty belongs to Him and praise belongs to Him. He brings to life, and He takes life away, and He is powerful over every thing. Muhammad is the apostle of God, may God bless him and accept his intercession on the day of resurrection on behalf of his community."[46]

Despite later narratives, which connect Muhammad to Jerusalem on the bases of different traditions (mainly the narrative on the *mi'raj*), his intercessory role on the Last Day and the belief that Jerusalem was the eschatological locale *par excellence*, played a pivotal role in establishing the prominence of Jerusalem in the early days, a reverence only expanded in the following centuries.

[44] Donner 2010, 194–211.

[45] Donner 2010, 234.

[46] Donner 2010, 235.

The Mount of Olives

The Holy Sepulchre certainly played an important role in late antique and early medieval Jerusalem, perhaps also providing a model – the pattern of a basilica-cum-rotunda – that was replicated in the al-Haram al-Sharif with the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. At the same time, however, the rotunda of the Church of Ascension, dominating Jerusalem landscape from the top of the nearby Mount of Olives, was also an important landmark in early medieval Islamic Jerusalem. As I mentioned above, the space between al-Haram al-Sharif and the Church of Ascension, or more precisely, between two natural locales such as the Sakhrat Bayt al-Maqdis (the Rock of Jerusalem) and the Tur Zayta (the Mount of Olives) drew on pre-existing narratives and beliefs and, accordingly, was invested with special meaning in the early period.[47] It is instructive to investigate how Muslims monumentalized this sense of sacredness and what, if any, was the role of pre-existing sacred buildings in this area.

In order to address these issues, we must ask three different questions: what were the figures associated with a given site in early medieval traditions? What was the physical development of the area (the transformation of the sacred landscape)? How did communities behave within such a sacred landscape?

Although it is not easy to isolate the exact date in which each tradition emerged, the eleventh-century work "The virtues of Jerusalem," written by Ibn al-Murajja, offers a summary of the figures associated with Tur Zayta within early medieval Muslim circles. Jesus figures prominently in traditions referring to the Mount of Olives because it was the site of his ascension into heaven, and, consequently, it became the primary place to offer prayer to Jesus.[48] These traditions also mention 'Umar b. al-Khattab since it was here where he established the encampment of his troops before the final conquest of the city in the year 636.[49] Traditions also include the figure of Safiyya, one of the wives of Muhammad, as she was told to have proffered a prayer on the Mount and that traces (*athar*) of such prayer remained visible.[50] Two other individuals belonging to the circle of 'Umar are likewise connected to the conquest of Jerusalem and, though more loosely, to the Mount of Olives: Shaddad b. Aws and 'Ubada b. al-Samit. The traditions collected by Ibn al-Murajja present the two Companions as witnesses (1) of the veneration of the Rock by early Muslims and (2) of the first prayer performed on the al-Haram in Jerusalem. Their burials are also mentioned together in one tradition. It is also likely the site of their graves was located in the Valley of the Gehenna (see below).[51] Finally, the Mount of Olives is presented as al-Sahira, namely the place mentioned by the Quran (LXXIX: 14) in relation to the Day of Judgment.[52] As a result of all these associations, the Mount of Olives came to be considered sacred: when God distributed glory and greatness to the world, he particularly focused on specific sites (*mawatin*) and mountains in which praying was recommended; and the Mount of Olives is listed among them.[53]

These traditions accumulated in the early medieval period and were collected by Ibn al-Murajja at the beginning of the eleventh century. The physical landscape also mirrored this process and was transformed accordingly. At a very early period, the Mount of Olives was characterized by a dense Christian sacred landscape (in the early sixth century, circa twenty-four churches are attested in the area), undoubtedly dominated by the late antique rotunda of the Ascension.[54] The church consisted of a circular arcade with a porched entrance on the southern side. The inner area was roofless and, at the center, was a rock in which the footprints of Christ were visible

[47] Elad 1995, 141–144 (also referring to a work in Hebrew by Livne-Kafri).

[48] Ibn al-Murajja, nn. 349 and 67 respectively.

[49] Ibn al-Murajja, nn. 35, 42.

[50] Ibn al-Murajja, nn. 350 and 68 respectively.

[51] Ibn al-Murajja, nn. 33, 35, 37, 121, 160, 161, 277, 297.

[52] Ibn al-Murajja, n. 68.

[53] Ibn al-Murajja, nn. 216, 343, 404.

[54] Wilkinson 2002, 335.

(**Figure 5**). Early medieval pilgrims mention an altar on the eastern side of the structure and windows with lamps on the side facing towards Jerusalem, illuminating the valley separating it from the city. Two columns, considered miraculous, are also mentioned in the descriptions.[55] It is likely that Muslims attended such churches since later traditions prohibit Muslims from entering the Church of the Ascension.[56] By the early period, the only other place Muslims attended was probably a plain area, the one identified with al-Sahira, on the Mount of Olives. It functioned as *musalla*, namely a vast roofless area nearby or within cities, often situated close to a burial area. It was used, especially in the early period, for prayers in special times of the year, such as the feasts related to the end of the months of Ramadan and Hajj.[57]

The geographer Ibn al-Fakih mentioned the *musalla* on the Mount of Olives in his work, which is dated to the year 903. The *musalla* is named after 'Umar b. al-Khattab, suggesting that the connection between the *musalla* and the place in which 'Umar b. al-Khattab was supposed to have prayed before entering Jerusalem was already operative by the early tenth century. Ibn al-Fakih also adds that the Mount of Olives was the place of several burials of prophets (*qubur al-anbiya'*).[58] A different picture is offered instead by al-Muqaddasi who, in the later part of the tenth century (around the year 985), describes the area of the Mount of Olives in his geographical work. He mentions the Church of the Ascension. He also adds that there was a mosque commemorating the figure of 'Umar and the event of the conquest of the city in the seventh century. The mosque is said to have been located on the summit of the Mount, probably nearby the Church. This is the place in which the mosque – still visible today – was later established, probably replacing the earlier tenth-century building (**Figure 6**). The place is described as distinct from the al-Sahira, which is said to be

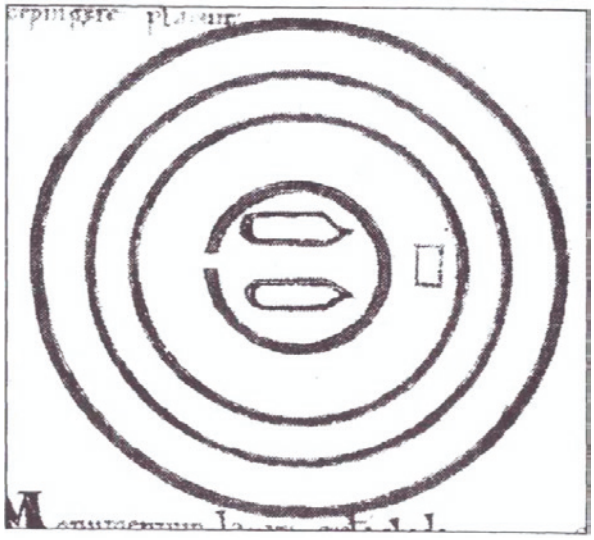

Figure 5: The plan of the Church of the Ascension in an eleventh-century copy of Bede Venerabilis' De locis sanctis
(after Wilkinson 2002)

a nearby area in which the Resurrection was believed to have taken place and defined as a place in which blood was never spilled (a feature that sacralized the place, as it made it a *haram* area). In the following paragraph, al-Muqaddasi lingers on the Valley of the Gehenna and says that above the Tomb of Mary there were many tombs including those of the two abovementioned Companions of the Prophet, Shaddad b. Aws and 'Ubada b. al-Samit.[59] In al-Muqaddasi's text one can notice traces of the increasing monumentalization of a distinct, Islamic sacred landscape. After that narratives, traditions, and beliefs were rooted in specific locales, the stable and fixed form given to them contributed to the Islamization of the landscape.

Concomitantly, the same corpus of traditions forbid Muslims from attending Christian holy sites and encouraged them to visit the new Muslim sites. With regard to the Valley of the Gehenna and the Mount of Olives, such a transition is visible in the Muslim perception of the Tomb of Mary and the Church of the Ascension. Starting with the eighth century, traditions, which urge Muslims to avoid these churches, emerge. These traditions reflect a debate among Muslims about the appropriate-

[55] Wilkinson 2002, 180–182; 243–244.
[56] Elad 1995, 139–140.
[57] Elad 1995, 143; Becker 2006, 50–51.
[58] Ibn al-Fakih al-Hamadhani, 101.
[59] Al-Muqaddasi, 171–172.

Figure 6: Sketch of church and the mosque at the Mount of Olives, Jerusalem
(after C.W. Wilson, Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt, London, 1880, vol.1, 90)

ness of entering such Christian places. While some traditions rely on 'Umar describing the reverence he paid to the Tomb of Mary or on Safiyya with regard to the Church of the Ascension, other passages condemn entering both churches because the former was sacrilegiously built in the Valley of the Gehenna and the latter had two pillars that were venerated as if they were idols.[60] It is likely that the early generations of Muslims were accustomed to attending and consuming sacredness within churches. This attitude, however, changed rapidly with the growth of a separate Muslim network of holy sites.[61] Christian churches, such as the Church of the Ascension, remained esteemed holy sites; however, Muslims were provided with an alternative Muslim narrative and physically redirected to other sites. The mosque of 'Umar at the Mount of Olives served as a Muslim holy shrine, which commemorated the figure of 'Umar b. al-Khattab. Yet, perhaps more importantly, this mosque was the Muslim place of worship in an area dense in sacredness.

Conclusion

Mosques were places of worship in which believers gathered to pray together. This activity was sacred. It derived from the state of purity of those performing the prayer and producing a collective, sacred gathering when believers jointly proffered prayers and Quranic passages.

In newly established cities, Muslims first planned mosques in order to serve the city from a functional point of view; however, as time progressed, Muslims started to associate mosques with narratives and eventually objects (including relics and tombs) in order to enhance their status at local and trans-regional levels.

The example of the Mount of Olives shows how the construction of Muslim holy places was articulated within conquered cities. In cities and areas dotted with pre-existing holy sites, Muslims first anchored their sacredness to existing traditions and locales while, with the passing of time, developed alternative, separate traditions and buildings to serve the Muslim community in particular. This process did not exclude the sharing of specific holy places among communities; however, the ruling and religious patrons provided the Muslim communities with a well-established and coherent sacred landscape of their own.

[60] Elad 1995, 138–141; Guidetti 2016, 155–156.
[61] Bashear 1991, 278–279.

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