

The Mosque of the Prophet and the House of the Prophet: Liminal Spaces in Muḥammad's Medina

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Abstract: This paper is meant to contribute to the debate on the function of the building erected by Muḥammad in Medina in the aftermath of the *hijra* by demonstrating, through a careful review of textual and topographical evidence, that the “Mosque of the Prophet” and the “House of the Prophet” were architecturally and topographically independent structures. The existence of two adjoining architectural nuclei, rigorously differentiated in status and function through well-defined boundaries, entailed a strict spatial distinction between public and private, whose importance, although completely overlooked by Western scholars, is repeatedly stressed in the Qur’ān itself. Moreover, the establishment of the congregational precincts of the mosque, which redefine the settlement patterns of the town according to a new hierarchy of space, constituted one of the main foundational collective events in Islamic history. Crossing these thresholds represented the first Islamic experience of liminality through which believers lost their individual status to experience a new spiritual and identitarian condition.

Introduction

This contribution finds its roots in a crucial essay Jeremy Johns published in 1999¹ which succeeded in rejecting the postulation that the mosque type evolved from traditional Arabic residential architecture, and in particular from a building identified by Caetani² and Creswell³ as “the house of the Prophet” in Medina. This belief, which we will refer to as the “domestic theory”, claimed that the building Muḥammad built in the aftermath of the *hijra*, known in Islamic tradition as *masjid al-Nabī*, “the Mosque of the Prophet”, had at the beginning been of a purely domestic, private and utilitarian nature.

The domestic theory was enthusiastically embraced by essentially the entire Western academia, and Creswell’s phantom “house of the Prophet” – a square courtyard of 100 × 100 cubits with a *zulla* on the *qibla* side, a smaller shaded area on the opposite wall, and 9 tiny chambers built in a row against the eastern wall – became one of the most popular buildings among students and scholars of Islamic architectural history. This model, establishing the direct filiation between the Arabic *dār* and the mosque type, entailed the major assumption that the “concept of the mosque” had not truly existed in Muḥammad’s days. On the contrary, the aetiology of the key building of Islamic civilization was traced back to a set of fortuitous events occurring after the death of the Prophet, in line with a misleading tendency typical of the Orientalist scholarly tradition.⁴

After decades of endorsement, the “domestic theory” was eventually smashed by Jeremy Johns⁵ who, drawing in part from the outstanding, and regrettably never published, doctoral

1 Johns 1999.

2 Caetani 1905, 371–382; 432–449.

3 Creswell 1979, 1–4.

4 On the role of the “trivial facts” in Creswell’s reconstruction of early Islamic architectural history, see Johns 1999, 86–88; Santi 2018, 70–71.

5 Johns 1999.

dissertation of Ghazi Bishes,⁶ systematically highlighted the weaknesses of the “domestic theory” and its notorious graphic rendering. Johns’ work has been recently resumed and built upon by Essam Ayyad. In a newly published ambitious monograph,⁷ the scholar provided a platform for a “de-orientalised” exploration of the topic by denouncing the tendency of Western scholars to trace back the emergence of the mosque type to non-Islamic religious buildings. He identifies in this attitude, and in a set of further stereotypical views embedded in the study area, the reason for our inadequate ability to evaluate the actual forces behind the creation of the mosque as an institutionally and architecturally defined type. Rather, he succeeds in demonstrating that the traditional mosque type evolved as a crystallization of the response to cogent religious imperatives, rather than as a result of cultural prompts and external influences which mingled together over time.

Johns and Ayyad’s points were pivotal in bringing to an end the debate on the origin of the building built by Muḥammad in Medina, once and for all. However, despite Caetani & Creswell’s “House of the Prophet” having been demolished and the conceptual and architectural independence of the mosque having been proven, there still lacks an ensuing discussion devoted to the question of where the Prophet and his family actually abode.

This paper will seek to provide a reliable account of the configuration of Medina’s urban fabric at the time of the Prophet,⁸ with a focus on the relationship between the mosque of the Prophet and the residence of Muḥammad and his wives. The final aim is the shedding of some light upon the early topography of Medina and its zoning dynamics, and to disclose insights into the differentiation and perception of space in the founding period of Islam.

Methodological remarks

Before getting to the heart of the matter, it is necessary to point out that scholars’ reluctance in undertaking research on the early urbanism of Medina can be attributed to the highly disruptive interventions which have affected the centre over past decades, which entailed the irremediable and complete loss of the archaeological landscape of the city.

For this reason, the study presented in this article relies for the most part on written records, and in particular the work of the Mamlūk era scholar al-Samhūdī (d. 1506 CE), author of the *Wafā’ al-wafā bi-akhbār dār al-muṣṭafā*.⁹ This is a monumental encyclopaedic narrative on Medina that can be rightly considered the most valuable and detailed extant source of information on the topic due to its astonishingly modern approach, especially when it comes to topographical and architectural details, which was applied to the body of earlier traditions the author collected and reported.¹⁰

6 Bishes 1979.

7 Ayyad 2019.

8 I have already engaged with this topic in two recent papers (Santi 2017, 2018), which tried to draw scholarly attention back to this problem, investigating the issue, never thoroughly explored before, of the architectural relationship between the mosque and the dwelling places of Muḥammad and his family. The two articles, along with the present contribution, stem from a comprehensive work on the early topography of Medina that I have conducted as a Newton International Fellow at SOAS University of London. The findings of this research are set to be published thoroughly in an in-progress monograph.

9 Samhūdī 1955.

10 Despite its enormous potential as essentially the only available platform upon which to reconstruct the historical topography of the city of the Prophet in the current state of knowledge, the *Wafā’ al-wafā* still lacks a comprehensive translated edition. As a consequence, it has been almost completely overlooked

When applicable, the textual evidence was verified by means of historical cartography including a detailed plan of the mosque as it appeared before the Saudi reconstructions.¹¹ Here, a set of architectural elements can be detected which have maintained the same exact position over time, functioning as secure topographical markers.

Reconstructing the mosque of the Prophet (622–638 CE)

As anticipated, the core point of this discussion concerns the structural relationship between the mosque and the “apartments” of the Prophet’s wives. The idea, still entrenched in literature,¹² that the two units were structurally attached and directly communicating is strongly interrelated to the “domestic theory” and Creswell’s “house of the Prophet” model. Nevertheless, and although Johns explicitly recognised the oddity of such an arrangement, he did not engage in a systematic refutation of what he himself defined an “architectural nonsense”.¹³ On the contrary, he virtually endorsed the structural adjacency of the mosque’s walls and the *hujarāt* by putting forward the fascinating suggestion that the habit of building the *dār al-imāra* attached to the *qiblī* wall of the mosque emerged through replication of Medina’s early topography, where, to quote “at least some of the domestic apartments of the Prophet were attached to his mosque, and several traditions locate the apartment of ʿĀ’isha against the qibla wall”.¹⁴

In a previous paper,¹⁵ by projecting data drawn from written records onto Ibrāhīm Rifʿat Pasha’s mosque plan of 1925, I demonstrated that, actually, the mosque of the Prophet and ʿĀ’isha’s *hujra*, whose original position is marked by the present Tomb of the Prophet, stood separately from each other during at least the first two building phases of the mosque.¹⁶ Indeed, accepting that the position of the *minbar* of the Prophet and the columns of the *Rawḍa* remained the same all through the many building phases the mosque underwent,¹⁷ we were able to trace the position of the eastern wall of the mosque in 622 as coinciding with the “Column of Repentance” and in 628 as coinciding with the fifth range of columns east of the *minbar* (Fig. 1).

That the mosque and the *hujra* stood separately from each other without any sort of direct connection is endorsed by some further pieces of information. One comes from the authority of Ibn Zabāla (d. 814–815 CE), who reported that the Umayyads added to the *zulla* a total of six aisles perpendicular to the *qiblī* wall. Since ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ʿUthmān added

by the previous scholarship that dealt with the architectural history of early Islamic Medina. Remarkable exceptions in this regard are the works of Harry Munt (2014) and Michael Lecker (1995).

11 This plan was published for the first time by Ibrāhīm Rifʿat Pasha (1925) and reused by Sauvaget in his fundamental monograph on the Umayyad Mosque of Medina (Sauvaget 1947).

12 See for instance Kuban 1947, 1–2; Creswell/Allan 1989, 4–5; Grabar 1989, 121; Pedersen 1991, 645–646; Hillenbrand 1994, 39–42.

13 Johns 1999, 74.

14 *Ibid.*, 87–88.

15 Santi 2018.

16 According to Samhūdī, the Prophet firstly built his mosque in 622, the year of the *hijra*, and enlarged it in 628 after the conquest of the Khaybar oasis (Samhūdī 1955, 1, 338–339, see also Akkouch 1940, 391).

17 This phenomenon of topographic conservatism is reported to have happened in the mosque of Medina since the very first rebuilding after the Prophet’s death. On this phenomenon related to the reconstructions by ʿUmar and ʿUthmān see Ayyad 2019, 328–334. On the topographic conservatism applied to the doors of the mosque in the Umayyad period, see Sauvaget 1947, 77.

two and one aisle on the west side respectively, and the length of the *qibla* wall remained unaltered from the Umayyad time onward, we can easily deduce that ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz added four aisles on the eastern side. This suggests that before 707 CE the eastern wall of the mosque stood in the place of the fifth range of columns left of the *minbar*. In fact, a number of 9th century authors including the abovementioned Ibn Zabāla and Yahyā al-Ḥusaynī (d. ca. 890 CE) report the presence of a low step running perpendicularly between the columns of the fifth row east of the *minbar*, which was part of the set of markers (*aʿlām*) embedded in the fabric of the Umayyad mosque to indicate the position of the Prophetic walls. This implies that ʿĀʿisha’s *hujra* stood roughly 5 meters to the east of the mosque’s wall even after the Prophetic enlargement of 628.¹⁸

*Reconstructing the dwelling quarters around the mosque (622–631 CE)*¹⁹

The structural independence of ʿĀʿisha’s chamber having been proven and Creswell’s “house of the Prophet” model having been definitively dismissed, one could be driven to think that the tiny hut where the Prophet was later buried stood alone as an independent building. Was that the actual house of the Prophet? What was its relationship to the other wives *hujarāt* referred to in the sources?

Further analysis of the available documentary material will allow us to delve deeper into the matter. It is worth saying that no evidence at all can be found in textual records alleging the presumed adherence²⁰ of the other Prophet’s wives *hujarāt* with the walls of the mosque or of private entrances between them and the latter.²¹

We shall therefore proceed to summarize the actual state of evidence on each *hujra* to shed light upon the original arrangement of Muḥammad’s dwelling quarters:²²

1. Sawda’s *hujra*: according to traditionists, it was attached to the east side of that of ʿĀʿisha,²³ which rules out the possibility that it was built against the mosque’s wall.
2. ʿUmm Salama’s *hujra*: we are not told by any of the reports about its exact position. All we know is that it was beside or near that of ʿĀʿisha, and that its owner built a mud bricks

18 As for the length of the walls of the mosque, in a previous article I traced out the values of 63×70 cubits for the first phase and 82×82 ca. for the second (see Santi 2018, 103–109). Based on my latest findings, however, I propose revising the measurements for the first and second Prophetic phases to 63×54 cubits and 80×70 , respectively. Detailed analysis of the data supporting these measurements will be extensively covered in my upcoming monograph. In his recent volume, Ayyad identifies three stages of construction in the early phase (Ayyad 2019, 156–163). However, his assumption is the result of a methodological shortcoming, as he takes into account two measurements which are actually reported by Samhūdī as two discordant accounts concerning the size of the first mosque of the Prophet before the rebuilding of 628 (see Samhūdī 1955, I, 341, 344). Moreover, Ayyad arbitrarily assumes that the first rebuilding happened after only one year from the foundation of the mosque: a piece of information that, to my knowledge, is not reflected in any report.

19 Note that this contribution is limited to the reconstruction of the dwelling places of Muḥammad’s household. A more comprehensive picture of the topography of Medina’s downtown will be presented in the in-progress monograph.

20 For the term “adherent” (*aderenti*) found in Caetani’s translation of Diyārbakrī (Caetani 1905, 377–378) and adopted by Creswell (1979, I.1, 8–9), see Santi 2018, 110–111.

21 On this matter see Santi 2017, 213 and Santi 2018, 111.

22 I already presented some of these data and the related reconstruction of the wives *dūr* (Santi 2017).

23 Bisheh 1979, 146.