The Imaginary City.
Literary Sources of Aulic Centers in Islam

Ana Maria NEGOIȚĂ

Los modelos planimétricos de las ciudades principescas del Islam en la Edad Media tienen diferentes fuentes: leyendas, cuentos míticos que se transmitían oralmente y que han influido simbólicamente la organización espacial de los centros áulicos; referencias del texto coránico; las obras literarias que se perpetúan en las diferentes regiones el imperio con una serie de cambios y versiones, leyendas locales; o modelos in situ de varias ciudades de la antigua Sumeria y especialmente los modelos mesopotámicos.
Al destacar las relaciones con las fuentes literarias para ver las similitudes con la planimetría de ciertos centros áulicos hay que referirnos generalmente a las ciudades simbólicas del mundo islámico, especialmente las capitales, un ejemplo es la Ciudad Circular "Dar al-Salam" (El Lugar de la Paz) del califa al-Mansur (primer centro urbano de Bagdad), o Madinat al-Zahra construida por Abd al-Nasir Rahman III (921-961) durante el Califato de Córdoba. Esto implica utilizar instrumentos específicos de arqueología literaria, los métodos comparativos prestados de varias áreas de investigación: la planificación urbana, la historia del arte, historia, historia de la arquitectura, arqueología, etc. Presentamos las fuentes literarias en espejo con el modelo planimétrico destacado, la investigación muestra aquellos elementos que crean la base de una hipótesis de que el respaldo de la traducción literaria de una cierta ciudad describe directamente el desarrollo planimétrico in situ,como esto aparece a partir de las fuentes históricas y arqueológicas.

Palabras clave: *Imran. La Ciudad de las Columnas , Corán, ciudades islámicas , Dar al-Salam (antigua ciudad de Bagdad) , Madinat al- Zahra.*

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 contracts seems to have its roots in both the cities typical of the Ancient Orient, cities with strong symbolic meanings in the planimetry (with preference for perfect geometric shapes such as the circle,

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

square, able to express the restoration of the cosmic order); and direct stipulated in the Qur'anic text.

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 contains the first central temple building, around this central element the "world" revolved. In contrast to the biblical Eden considered to be a "utopian" (place) without any counterpart in real life (the main icon - typical correspondence - recognized as the "heavenly city of Jerusalem" as the equivalent of Paradise only occurred later) Eridu was an actual place where the sacred character was underlined but still accessible. 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 (~ 5400 BC), was recognized as the centre of worship with a strong regional influence[2].

As the planimetry of palaces and buildings these bastions of the Islam cult 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, can be decrypted under two levels of interpretation: planimetric, social, economic, etc., and the legendary literary trend which recognized the tendency of the Middle Ages to imbue reality with symbolic and mythological levels and so 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 answers, "additions" that poets bring to the sacred text, 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

[1] Sumerian city considered to be the oldest urban settlement in Mesopotamia (~ 5400 BC), recognized as the center of worship with a strong regional influence.

[2] 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, p. 14-38.

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

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 honors him, and prospers him, he says, "My Lord has honored 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 honor 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 leveled, 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"[3].

They describe 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. Saddad sent his agents to all mines in the world to remove every single pieces of gold, "do not allow anyone in any part the slightest piece of gold", they even took the gold hidden in secret treasures. 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 and 20 wide, decorated with precious stones and pearls, the city was completely paved with pearls. All around they built 100,000 guard towers with heights between 500 to 110 cubits minted in precious stones and pearls on each side, on each corner were

[3] 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.

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

raised gold towers for the guardians. 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. They also brought pots, fountains, chandeliers, tables, cups, amphoras, pitchers and all kinds of utensils needed, made of gold; to gather all this and furniture throughout the city they needed 10 years. Then they brought all sorts of dishes, drinks, desserts, perfumes, candles with different flavours, amber and camphor. 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. Mursid Ibn Saddat was his first born and the most intelligent of all children, a good politician and popular among courtiers. 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"[4].

"Said Allah, Praise Him - in the Quran: And that it is He who is the Lord of Sirius./ And that it is He who destroyed the first Aad./ And Thamood, spared no one./ And the people of Noah before that; for they were most unjust and most oppressive./ And He toppled the ruined cities./ And covered them with whatever covered them./ So which of your Lord's marvels can you deny?/ This is a warning, just like the first warnings. / The inevitable is imminent./ None besides God can unveil it./ Do you marvel at this discourse?/ And laugh, and do not weep?/ Lost in your frivolity/ So bow down to God, and worship!" And He hid the city from human eyes, which could be seen at night in the desert as a light thanks to gold and precious stones shining as chandeliers, but when they approached it could not be seen anymore, the light moved elsewhere. Only a man of those who accompanied the Prophet - God bless him and give him all the glory, could approach the city, his name was *Abd Allah Ibn Qulab Al-Ansari*, one day he went out to look for a lost camel. Following the footprints of his lost camel he arrived near the mountain Aden and he saw the wall of Imran: The City with Columns. Looking at the city he saw glowing the red gold bricks and high watchtowers made of gold decorated with precious stones, and the city grew in his eyes, so immense that he could not see where it begun and where it ended, he was so amazed. As he approached his amazement and fear grew and he said to himself: "It is like the Garden of Paradise promised to the humble and virtuous in this life." He turned to one of the gates, dismounted from the camel and went inside the city. When he saw those palaces and rivers and trees, but did not meet anyone he thought: "I go to see the Mu`awiya and I will tell about this city, to call to come here and live within it." He took a handful of pearls, gems and emeralds put them in a pouch which he had in one of the saddlebags. Guided by the cardinal points of

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

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

the city he thought "It's not far from Mount Aden!" And went dragging his camel. Arriving in Damascus he asked to be received by Mu`awiya, and the ruler asked him: "From where have you come?". “From a city of gold, so immense that we cannot see neither the beginning nor the end, a city with golden palaces with rivers and streets of precious stones. It looks like the garden of Paradise which Allah has promised his servants, as it shown in the Qur'an". Mu`awiya replied and said, "Surely you saw this city in your dream". "I was really awake", said `Abd Allah, so I took a handful of gems, and took the bag with emeralds and stones as never before seen. Among them were found camel dung mixed with musk and amber, saffron, camphor who lost their scent but regained it when heated, and sprayed their odours in all directions. Mu`awiya was amazed about all this and said, "Indeed you saw a miracle". Then he sent for Al-Ahbar Ka`b, Lord guard him well and he was welcomed, sat down and the ruler asked: "O Abu Ishaq, you know something about a city of gold?" Al-Ahbar Ka`b said: "Yes, prince of believers". Allah said to Moses - peace be upon him - about how it was to be built, about the history and how the builders died, and also said to the Prophet Muhammad - God bless him and give him the glory: "Don`t you see what your Lord did with Imran the city with columns of the people of Aad, a city unlike any other in the world?" that Allah hid it from the eyes of men, and only one man from this nation could enter its gates, he will be called `Abd Allah Ibn Al-Annsari Qulab and he began to describe the city. Then he looked at `Abd Allah who was seated before him and said," This is the man, the one who is sitting here", and talked to him about what he saw, about the description of the city as it appears in the Torah, and he said that no one will enter the city after him until the day of Judgment. Mu`awiya marvelled and ordered gifts, expensive clothes and money for them"[5].

The city is described in a poetic image 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 stylistic to represent the idea of beauty which is synonymous with luxury, exuberance, glamour, features that are to be found constantly in the aesthetic conception of Muslim architecture. The senses that are involved are predominantly visual and olfactory, which clearly substantiate the preference of (high class) 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

[5] Abu Hamid Al-Garni, Tuhfat Al-Albad. View Maria Jesus Rubiera, *La Arquitectura en la Literatura Arabe*, Madrid, Ediciones Hyperion, 1998, p. 56-59 (our translation).

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

references about this fantastic city in the Andalusian area is Nafh Al-Tib's Al-Maqqari[6].

In the particular 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 décor literally inspired by the decorative mural 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"[7].

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 , nr. 26, London, Green Wood Press, 1991

Jeal, François (ed.) Regards à l 'Andalus (15ème siècle et 8ème), Madrid, Casa de Velasquez, Ruth Editions d' Ulm, 2006, p. 81-95

[6] Abu Abbas Al-Maqqari (1591-1632), an historian known for his special interest in the texts and legends of Andalusian and Maghrebian space, texts to which he added his own interpretations and additions. Through his literary work historians could highlight how certain topics survived in folk poetry in the western areas of the Muslim empire, analyzing the texts` foreground is obvious that the author brings a local flavor specific to the Andalusian and Maghrebian spaces, which are typical for some "literary techniques" thus having access to the repertoire of common aesthetic and taste of the mentioned period. View François Jeal (ed.) Regards à l 'Andalus (15ème siècle et 8ème), Madrid, Casa de Velasquez, Ruth Editions d' Ulm, 2006, p. 81-95.

[7] 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.

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)

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, nr. 4, 2006

Lassner, Jacob, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages: Text and Studies* , Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1970, p. 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, p. 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), p. 112-144

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

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

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

Petersen, Andrew, *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*, New Yourk, Routledge, 1996

Rubiera, Maria Jesus, *La Arquitectura en la literatura arabe*, Madrid, Libros Hiperion, 1998 (2nd edition)

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

BDD-A19557 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 08:54:16 UTC)