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What Made a Place 'Holy' in Early Islam? An Inquiry into Meaning and Doctrinal Modalities

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Abstract

Compared to other religious systems rooted in Late Antiquity, Islam placed greater emphasis on the transcendent, assigning less value to physical forms *per se*. This article seeks to explore conceptions relating to what made a place 'holy' in early Islamic places of worship, delving into understanding the significance of sacred spaces in Islam, and dissecting the procedures and beliefs instrumental in the consecration of such locations. The primary focus rests on mosques, which were deemed the pinnacle of sacred spaces during the nascent Islamic period. This discourse deliberately omits discussion on Islamic funerary structures, which emerged in the classical form later in the third/ninth century. Instead, it analyzes the cases of the Ka'ba in Mecca and the Prophet's mosque in Medina. The former serves as an exemplar of Islamized sanctuaries, whereas the latter epitomizes the prevalent archetype of sacred spaces in early Islam.

Keywords: early Islam, sacred space, mosque, the Ka'ba, symbolism

Introduction

Islam fundamentally posits an austere monotheism, and strictly shuns any form of physical depiction of the Creator. Compared to conventional practices in Late Antiquity, Islam (along with Judaism) is generally unreceptive to any implied divine value immanent in physical forms. The present paper sets out to scrutinize whether and how this concept applies to early Islamic places of worship. To do so, the paper attempts to explore the meaning of a holy place in Islam and investigate the array of procedures and modalities that were there in the early period to make a place holy. Special attention is given to the mosque, as the supreme epitome of sacred space in the early Islamic decades. In later times, Muslim civilization developed various types of religious architecture, such as *madrasas*, *khanqas*, and *zawiyas*. These structures, among others, were sanctified to varying degrees, on account of them being used as places of prayer that also served other didactic and societal functions, thereby regarded as sacred (i.e. pure, ennobled, and inviolable).

Simultaneously, another type of holy places, namely funerary, emerged due to an array of cultural milieus. There are many instances of mausoleums being attached to mosques, and others where the latter were built on or near them. These were frequently visited by segments of the public to pray, request intercession, and make offerings. The term *mujarrab*, 'verified', is frequently used in the literature of *ziyara* (i.e. visitation of tombs) to affirm the esteemed status of a particular location, suggesting it as a place where prayers and invocations are believed to be fulfilled.[1] There have always been (and continue to be) fervent debates among Islamic jurists about the permissibility of building mosques on graves, burying people within pre-existing mosques, or visiting graves and mosques as places of visitation and pilgrimage. While funerary structures are an unmistaken manifestation of Muslim tradition and practice, mainstream Islam (as far as religion, rather than culture, is concerned) does not normally tolerate this type of architecture and the observances related to it. Honing in on the formative period, the present article does not discuss Islamic funerary structures, mainly because it was not until the third/ninth century that such a type of sacred places was introduced to Islamic culture.

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[1] For example, see al-Maqrizi (1998), *al-Mawa'iz wa-l-i'tibar bi dhikr al-khitat wa-l athar: al-Ma'ruf bi-l khitat al-maqriziyya*, ed. M. Zaynuhum and M. Al-Sharqawi, 3 vols., Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, iii, p. 640. See also al-Sakhawi (1979), *al-Tuhfa al-latifa fi tarikh al-madina al-sharifa*, 3 vols., Cairo: As'ad Tarabzuni al-Husayni, p. 129. On *ziyara* parctice and tradition, particularly from a Shi'i perspective, see Amelia Gallagher (2022), "Ziyara: 'Alawi Rituan and Practice," in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 402-408; Ingvild Flaskerud (2022), "Twelver Shi'a Pilgrimage: *Ziyara*," in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 385-401; Asghar Molaei (2022), "Redefining the Dimensions of Spirituality and Pilgrimage in Religious Tourism: Iranian Pilgrimage Cities," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, Vol. 10, pp. 144-162.

Nor is this article meant to explore other later interpretations and constructions of sacred spaces found in certain fictional contexts. The Whirling Dervishes, for example, a Sufi order founded by Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 672/1273), developed a meditative practice known as the sema/sama, a ceremonial performance involving whirling or turning. Sufi turning represents a devotional form of *dhikr*, symbolizing the remembrance and contemplation of God. The entranced spinning of the carefully coordinated Sufi body was believed to transform an ordinary or secular place into a space for mystical encounters with the Divine.[2] Instead, the article will explore the specific cases of the Ka'ba in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, analyzing the former as an example of Islamized sanctuaries and the latter as a representative model of the predominant sacred spaces in early Islam.

The Meaning of 'Holy' in Reference to Places and Material Objects

Generally, the adjective *muqaddas*, a derivative of the triliteral root *qa-du-sa*, referring to things of or pertaining to the holy, is used in Arabic sources to specify holy objects and places of pre-Islamic nations—particularly those of the Jews and the Christians. In the Qur'an, however, only two places are described as *muqaddas*: the Holy Land (taken by most exegetes as referring to Biblical Palestine or Bilad al-Sham),[3] and the Holy Valley (of Tuwa near Mount Sinai).[4] As such, *muqaddas* does not mean a place worthy of worship in itself, but a place of veneration and respect. This is enhanced by the fact that the same land is referred to in another position of the Qur'an as 'blessed' by the Divine (*barakna fi-ha*).[5] Therefore, such places are made holy on account of them being praised by God, who alone is worthy of worship. According to Islamic traditions, these places are acclaimed as *muqaddas*, mainly because nothing in them was ever worshipped instead of, or alongside, God. More practically, however, they are termed 'holy' due to the belief that God and His Apostles acclaim them as such. The significance, let alone the historical validity, of the exclusive worship of God in these places remains a point of contention.

Other derivatives of *qa-du-sa*, namely *maqdis* and *quds*, are exclusively used in the Arabic sources, including *hadith*, to refer to al-Masjid al-Aqsa and Jerusalem itself. Adjectives such as *muharram* and *haram*—usually translated into English as 'forbidden, sanctified or sacred'—are definitely more in use than *muqaddas* when referring to Islamic (or rather Islamized) holy places. Both adjectives derive from the verb *ha-ru-ma*, 'be forbidden'.[6] The place of worship which is usually described by the sources as *haram* and *haram* is the Holy Sanctuary in Mecca.[7] The city itself is typically referred to as *al-balad al-haram*, where killing animals, cutting trees, and fighting were forbidden by ancient custom, which Muslim sources attribute to Mecca being made *haram amin*, 'an inviolable sanctuary', by the Prophet Abraham.[8] The most salient aspect of its *tahrim*, 'sanctification', is that killing, whether in the course of fighting or hunting, is utterly banned in its precincts.[9] Medina and its grand mosque were likewise proclaimed *haram* by the Prophet Muhammad.[10]

It interesting to note that apart from the three mosques of Mecca, Jerusalem, and Medina (the only ones that are worthy of visitation, as we shall see) mosques are very rarely referred to in the Arabic sources using any of the above adjectives. The term *haram* is only used to denote the mosque proper (*haram al-masjid*).

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[2] See June-Ann Greeley (2022), "Sufi Turning and the Spirituality of Sacred Space," *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 108-119. See also Mabrouk Chibani Mansouri (2018), "Holy Time and Popular Invented Rituals in Islam: Structures and Symbolism," *Al-Jami'ah*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 121-54.

[3] Qur'an 5:21. Qur'anic passages are quoted from *The Holy Quran: English translation of the meanings and commentary*, rev. and ed. by Presidency of Islamic Researches, Ifta, Call and Guidance, Medina: King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1990. See also Ibn Kathir (1998), *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, ed. by M. Husayn Shams al-Din, 9 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, iii, p. 67. 'Palestine' is traditionally understood in terms of the Roman description of the province 'Syria Palaestina', which may or may not overlap with geographical regions referred to in the Qur'an. 'The Holy Land' as used in English might geographically be more akin to 'Bilad al-Sham' in Arabic (when understood to refer to the broader Levant region, rather than Damascus).

[4] Qur'an 20:12; 79: 16.

[5] Qur'an 7:137; 17:1; 21:71; 21:81; 34:18.

[6] Interestingly, the verb *ihtarama*, 'to respect', is another derivative of *haruma*. It particularly means 'to consider the sanctity (*hurma*) of an object, place, time, etc.'

[7] As an example, see Qur'an 14:37.

[8] Qur'an 28:57; 29:67. The whole city of Mecca is referred to in the Qur'an as being inviolable/ 'forbidden'. See Qur'an 27:91.

[9] See Qur'an 5:95-7.

[10] For a thorough discussion of Medina's *tahrim*, see Harry Munt (2014), *The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 42-64, esp. p. 51.

However, when a certain mosque is meant to be dignified, less exalting modifiers such as *mubarak*, *musharraf, sharif*, or *mu'azzam*—all of which can be suitably translated as 'honoured'—are normally applied. This is generally how mosques are characterized not only in literary sources, but also in their own historical inscriptions. The foundation text of Ibn Tulun's mosque in Cairo, for instance, refers to the structure as blessed and prosperous (*hadha al-masjid al-mubarak al-maymun*) (Figure 1).[11] The phrase: "so and so ordered this blessed mosque to be established" (*amara bi-insha' hadha al-masjid/al-jami' al-mubarak*) is featured in most foundation slabs of medieval mosques.

Figure 1: The Foundation Text of Ibn Tulun's Mosque in Cairo

From the initial Islamic period, Muslims entrenched over antipathy to any veneration of physical forms, which were anathema to the Islamic ethic of monotheism.[12] There is no physical embodiment of divine grace in Islam similar to the 'Ark of the Covenant' in Judaism, for instance, albeit this is described in the Qur'an itself as a source of victory, peace, and guidance for the Israelites following the death of Moses. According to early *hadith* collections, the Prophet Muhammad warned his followers against venerating his grave after his death, and disapproved of accounts of grave shrines witnessed by his wives and Companions in Abyssinia.[13] In line with this ethos, the tree known as *shajarat al-ridwan*, 'tree of satisfaction', beneath which the Companions swore a pledge to the Prophet to retaliate if 'Uthman b. 'Affan had been assassinated in 6/628,[14] was extirpated by the third Caliph 'Umar b. al-Khattab, due to fears that people might venerate the tree itself.[15] Furthermore, the dwellings of the wives of the Prophet were razed during the expansion of al-Masjid al-Nabawi in 88-90/707-9.[16] Additionally, Islamic jurists tended toward the absolute rejection of folk practices of seeking help from or producing totems, amulets, and talismans, which were prolific throughout the ancient Near East since time immemorial. Major categories of *hadith* compendiums critique *ruqa*, *tama'im*, and *tiwala*, generally considering them to lead people to polytheism. There are also

[11] Su'ad Mahir (1971), *Masajid Misr wa-awliya'uha al-salihun*, 5 vols., Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'la li-l-Shu'un al-Islamiyya, i, p. 150.

[12] See Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 5237; Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 4161; al-Tirmidhi, *hadith* no. 2180. *Hadiths* from the six canonical books are cited from *Mawsu'at al-hadith al-sharif: al-Kutub al-sitta, Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Sunan Abi Dawud, Jami' al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Nasa'i wa Sunan Ibn Maja*, rev. Shaykh Salih b. 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, Riyadh: Dar al-Salam, 1999. *Hadith* and Arabic accounts are my own translation unless otherwise specified. See also Abu Shama (1981), *al-Ba'ith 'ala inkar al-bida' wa-l-hawadith*, 2nd ed., Makka: Matba'at al-Nahda al-Haditha, pp. 23-5.

[13] See Malik b. Anas (1998), *al-Muwatta': riwayat Abi Mus'ab al-Zuhri*, ed. Bashshar Ma'ruf and Mahmud Khalil, 3rd ed., 2 vols., Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, *hadiths* nos. 570-1; al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 427; Muslim, *hadiths* nos. 1183–4; Ibn Abi Shayba (2006), *al-Musannaf*, ed. M. 'Awama, 26 vols., Jeddah: Dar al-Qibla; Beirut: Mu'assasat 'Ulum al-Qur'an, *hadiths* nos. 7626, 7630; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr al-Andalusi (1976), *al-Tamhid li-ma fi al-Muwatta' min al-ma'ani wa-l-asanid*, ed. by Mustafa al-'Alawi and Muhammad al-Bakri, 26 vols.; vol v. ed., Sa'id A'rab, Rabat: al-Matba'a al-Malakiyya, pp. 41-2. See also al-Darimi (2000), *Sunan*, ed. H. Salim al-Darini, 4 vols., Riyadh: Dar al-Mughni, *hadith* no. 1443; Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (1959), *Fath al-Bari bi-sharh al-Bukhari*, 14 vols., Cairo: Mustafa al-Halabi, ii, p. 78; Ibn Taymiyya (n.d.), *Iqtida' al-sirat al-mustaqim li-mukhalafat ashab al-jahim*, ed. Nasir al-'Aql, 2 vols., Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, i, pp. 298-303.

[14] Ibn Hisham (1990), *al-Sira al-nabawiyya*, ed. by 'Umar A. Tadmuri, 3rd ed., 4 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, iii, pp. 261-9.

[15] Ibn Sa'd (2001), *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-kabir*, ed. by 'Ali M. 'Umar, 11 vols., Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, ii, pp. 93-6.

[16] Ibid, i, p. 430; Ibn al-Najjar (1981), *al-Durra al-thamina fi tarikh al-madina*, ed. by M. Z. 'Azab, Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa, pp. 153; al-Samhudi (1955), *Wafa' al-wafa bi-akhbar dar al-mustafa*, ed. by M. Muhyi ad-Din, 4 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, ii, pp. 516-7; 547-8; See also A. J. Wensinck (1960), *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition: Alphabetically Arranged*, Leiden: Brill, p. 154.

numerous *hadiths* positing puritanical approaches to building, clothing, and artwork, including tapestries, cautioning Muslims against elaborate and elevated structures. Meanwhile, the absolute prohibition of depicting religious figures, such as prophets, entails varying shades of restriction on depictions of humans and animals across different schools of jurisprudence.[17]

The rigid aniconism of Islam, in contrast to the prolific iconography of Eastern Christianity adjacent to the early Muslim civilization, reflects the conscious and explicit rejection of any vestiges of pre-Islamic Arab polytheism, which had been expressed in the veneration of idols at the community and household levels.[18] There is limited material evidence of pre-Islamic Arab religious life, usually referred to in medieval Muslim literature as *ayyam al-jahiliyya* ('days of ignorance'). The pre-Islamic Arabs did not record their history in a systematic way, but a wealth of information about this period can still be gleaned from various historical sources, including ancient inscriptions (e.g., Dadanitic and Safaitic inscriptions), non-Arab informants (e.g., Herodotus and Strabo), tribal memory, recollections of invasions, and poetry spanning different themes and genres.[19] Nevertheless, the majority of insights we have about this cultural landscape is derived from ancient epics, genealogies, and histories by early Muslim historians, such as Muhammad b. Ishaq (d. 151/768), Hisham b. al-Kalbi (d. 204/819), Abu 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthanna (d. *ca*. 209/824), 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Mada'ini (d. *ca*. 225/840), and al-Azraqi (d. 250/864), who described different personas, materials, and beliefs associated with the pre-Islamic Arabian idols.[20]

Islam's fundamental mission was to restore Abrahamic monotheism, as articulated by the Prophet, and to reintroduce monotheism first to Arabia and subsequently to the world,[21] in the footsteps of Abraham,[22] as indicated by the following verse of the Qur'an:

> Remember Abraham said: "O my Lord! Make this city [i.e., Mecca] one of peace and security; and preserve me and my sons from worshipping idols. O my Lord! They have indeed led astray many among mankind […]."[23]

In its mission to purify the Muslims from polytheism and keep it at bay,[24] Islam forbade the creation of statues or images of humans, and the building of tombs (other than a simple gravestone to mark the identity of the deceased). 'Ali b. Abi Talib is reported to have commanded Abu al-Hayyaj al-Asadi, a chief superintendent in his caliphate, saying: "Shall I not send you on a mission akin to the one the Messenger of God entrusted to me? Do not leave any statue without erasing it, do not leave any raised grave without leveling it, and do not leave any image without obliterating it."[25] During the conquest of Mecca, when the Prophet returned from his long exile to take over the city, he personally participated in destroying the idols within and around the Ka'ba and other pre-Islamic symbols.[26] Also, all effigies inside the 'Ancient House' were destroyed, including the two sheep horns hitherto venerated by the Quraysh, with 'Umar b. al-Khattab

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[17] See E. Ayyad (2019), *The Making of the Mosque: A Survey of Religious Imperatives*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, p. 296.

[18] See Gerald R. Hawting (2002), "Idolatry and Idolaters," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ii, pp. 475-80; Ira M. Lapidus (2002), *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 14-7; Irfan Shahîd (1970), "Pre-Islamic Arabia," in P. M. Holt, Ann K. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (eds), *The Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I A: The Central Islamic Lands from Pre-Islamic Times to the First World War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3-29 (esp. p. 24).

[19] For an adequate exploration of the history and literary landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, see M. C. A. McDonald (2008), *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, Surrey: Ashgate. See also 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri (1983), *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, trans. by Lawrence Conrad, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 14-20. Gregor Schoeler (2009), *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, transl. Shawkat M. Toorawa, rev. ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 16-24.

[20] See Ibn Ishaq (2004), *al-Sira al-nabawiyya*, ed. A. Farid al-Mazidi, Beirut: Dar al-Kutb al-'Ilmiyya, i, pp. 60-5; Ibn al-Kalbi (1924), *Kitab al-Asnam*, ed. by Ahmad Zaki Pasha, 2nd ed., Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya; Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, i, pp. 63, 93-104. See also Michael Lecker (2010), "Pre-Islamic Arabia," in Chase F. Robinson (ed), *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 153-70 (esp. pp. 161-3). For a critical analysis of Ibn al-Kalbi's narrative concerning the idols of pre-Islamic Arabia, see Jamal J. Elias (2012), *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception, and Practice in Islam*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 102-7; Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 296-7.

[21] See Jonathan Berkey (2010), "Islam," in Robert Irwin (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam Volume 4: Islamic Cultures and Societies to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 19-59 (esp. pp. 20-3).

[22] For insights into idols and the religion of Abraham, see J. Elias, *Aisha's cushion*, pp. 108-11.

[23] Qur'an 14:35-6.

[24] See Gerald R. Hawting (2002), "Idols and Images," *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ii, pp. 481-4.

[25] Muslim, *hadith* no. 969.

[26] See Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 4156.

and 'Uthman b. Talha being entrusted with this task in 8/630.[27] According to some commentators, the reference to two horns could symbolize those of the ram (*kabsh*) that Abraham sacrificed to spare his son Ishmael's life.[28] This could suggest the continuity of Abrahamic tradition among the Arabs. For too long, Judeo-Christian traditions have been overly emphasized as the primary lens through which pre-Islamic monotheism is to be understood, dismissing the entirety of pre-Islamic Arab history as *jahiliyya*. The 'henotheism' of the Quraysh and the traditions of the pre-Islamic *hunafa'* are areas deserving more attention from modern academics.

Islamic theology is the antithesis of religions in which divinities are represented or understood to inhabit physical matter. The God of Islam is emphatically unseen and unfathomable, and can only be dimly comprehended via transcendental echoes.[29] The unparalleled nature of the Divine underscores the inherent worthlessness of the material universe in the Islamic ethical system, and thus the superiority of spiritual submission to the Creator rather than striving within creation: "Verily God does not look at your guises or your wealth, but He does with your hearts and your deeds."[30] This principle is also related to Islamic religious art exhibiting the non-representational and abstract. As described by Kuban: "A dependence on any implied value in forms is inherently anti-Islamic. Forms are transient. Only Allah, who is formless, is eternal. Thus, the perception of any continuity of form is not a religious but a cultural attitude."[31]

Within the tradition of Islam, the religion is aniconistic rather than iconoclastic, but the radical renunciation of representational forms of spiritual figures it disseminated, particularly in West Asia and North Africa, inspired retroactive iconoclasms in Christendom, including those of the Byzantine emperors Leo III (r. 717-41) and Constantine V (r. 741-75). The Islamic renunciation of statues and devotional metaphors, or indeed representations of human figures of any kind, exacerbated longstanding unease in Jewish and Christian circles about the place and role of images in religious practices.[32] Most scholars consider the Islamic reform to mark a sharp disconnect from the common *modus operandi* of Late Antiquity (although rabbinical Judaism has a similar abhorrence of religious imagery in devotional contexts). While Christian communities within Muslim lands outside Arabia generally retained the freedom to uphold their conventional religious practices and forms, including icons within churches, the prevailing and official forms of religious art marked an abrupt shift away from the world of Byzantine mosaics and the Latin Bestiary, signaling the advent of classical Arab-Islamic art.[33]

What Made a Place Holy in Early Islam?

In early Islam, a place was made sacred through one or more of three main ways: (i) statements in the Muslim Holy Scriptures; (ii) its institution as a place of worship—particularly a mosque; (iii) and its association with the memory of the Prophet.

Places Made Holy by the Muslim Holy Scriptures

After the triumph of Islam, the Qur'an and *hadith* reacted variously to pre-Islamic holy places: many were commanded to be destroyed; two were deemed Islamic sacred precincts; and others were left to survive.

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[27] Ibn Abi Shayba, *hadith* no. 4621; al-Azraqi (2003), *Akhbar makka wa-ma ja'a fi-ha mina-l-athar*, ed. by 'Abd al-Malik Duhaysh, Makka: Maktabat al-Asadi, p. 322; al-Waqidi (1984), *Kitab al-Maghazi*, ed. by Marsden Jones, 3 vols., 3rd ed., Cairo; Manuscript edition, ed. by Marsden Jones, 3 vols., London, 1965-6, ii, pp. 834; E. Abdelrahman (2010), "The Influence of Hadith on the Architecture of Early Congregational Mosques," Doctoral Thesis, University of Leeds, p. 191; Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 297-8, 305-6.

[28] See al-Shawkani (2006), *Nayl al-awtar min asrar muntaqa al-akhbar*, ed. by M. Subhi Hallaq, 8 vols., Dammam: Dar Ibn al-Jawzi, iii, p. 599.

[29] Qur'an 2:3; 2:255; 5:94; 21:49; 35:18; 36:11; 50:33; 67:12; 112:1-4.

[30] *Muslim*, *hadith* no. 6543.

[31] Doğan Kuban (1980), "Symbolism in its Regional and Contemporary Context," in Jonathan G. Katz (ed), *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity*, Proceedings of Seminar Four in the Series Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, Philadelphia: The Ağa Khan Award for Architecture, pp. 12-17 (esp. p. 13). See also Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, p. 298; Abdelrahman, "Early Congregational Mosques," p. 199. However, this does not imply that Islamic art failed to evolve prominent symbolic aspects in later periods. For instance, the minaret has transitioned to being more symbolic than utilitarian; its primary significance today lies in visually signalling the presence of a mosque or a Muslim community, rather than (just) serving as a platform for muezzins to call for prayer.

[32] The ongoing contrast between material and anti-material elements is a recurring theme in Judaic and Christian discussions, notably in the initial phases of these monotheistic traditions. See Exodus 32; Hosea 2:17; Deuteronomy 32:17; Leviticus 26:1.

[33] See Robert Hillenbrand (1994), *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning*, ed. by Case Bound, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 16; Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp 298-9.

Pagan Sanctuaries Demolished

The destruction of idols (*awthan*) is, according to *hadith*, one of the Prophet's main undertakings: "I have been sent [by God] to preach maintaining ties of kinship, destroying idols and singling God out with worship […]."[34] As indicated by the Qur'an, an example had already been set by the Prophet Abraham who demolished the statues that were worshiped by his people.[35] Upon the victory of Islam, idols and pagan sanctuaries were commanded by the Prophet to be destroyed. Early sources, such as Ibn al-Kalbi and al-Azraqi (d. 250/864), report stories of the triumphant destruction of these idols and their sanctuaries (*buyut al-tawaghit*) immediately after the conquest of Mecca. In some cases, mosques were erected in their place.[36] For example, the Prophet commanded 'Uthman b. Abi al-'As to erect the mosque of Ta'if in the place where the settlement's patron idol once stood.[37] Nonetheless, this does not seem to have been a typical procedure; many of the mosques said by Ibn al-Kalbi to stand in lieu of preceding idols are of later dates than the time of the Prophet.

Islamized Sanctuaries: The Case of the Ka'ba

Two pre-Islamic places of worship are meant, according to the Qur'an and *hadith*, not just to be esteemed by the Muslim people but also to receive utmost veneration. These are the Bayt al-Haram in Mecca and the Bayt al-Maqdis in Jerusalem—both designated as *masjids* within the Qur'an itself.[38] As already hinted, these—in addition to the Prophet's mosque in Medina—are regarded as the most sacred Islamic mosques, and some *hadith*s indicate that Muslims should only specifically venture to these places of worship (i.e., as a pilgrimage), and adumbrate their various virtues.[39] They are believed by Muslims to be the first mosques established on earth, associated with the memoires of prominent prophets such as Adam, Abraham, and David (who are all highly esteemed in the Muslim ethos). Most importantly, both mosques are related to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad. While his affiliation to the Ka'ba is obviously established on account of Mecca being his place of birth, his association with al-Masjid al-Aqsa is based on the copious narratives on the well-known Night Journey (*rihlat al-isra' wa-l-mi'raj*).[40]

Let us now consider the case of the Ka'ba in some detail. After the conquest of Mecca, polytheists were given leave to continue visiting al-Masjid al-Haram for a single year, after which the revelation of Surat al-Tawba, 'Repentance', in 9/631, held by some exegetes to be the final chronological verse of the Qur'an, declared the Haram to be an exclusively Islamic shrine: "O you who believe! Truly the pagans are unclean; so let them not, after this year of theirs, approach the Sacred Mosque."[41] While some populist Christian narratives seek to cast Islam as a neo-pagan movement plagiarizing aspects of Abrahamic religion, the early Arab Muslims themselves, whose families had been rooted in the pre-Islamic religion, understood in their folk histories the conventional Islamic history of the Ka'ba as having been initiated by the earliest Prophets (i.e., Adam and Abraham), if not earlier by the angels, and its original monotheistic focus of devotion was subsequently diluted by the introduction of henotheistic idols introduced over the generations. Early Islamic histories attest that it was an epicentre for a cult of 360 idols by the coming of Islam,[42] and this belief system was referred to in the Qur'an with the polytheists' claim that they served the idols as intermediaries to God: "We only serve them (namely idols) in order that they may bring us nearer to God."[43]

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[34] Muslim, *hadith* no. 1930. See also *hadith* no. 2243.

[35] Qur'an 21:57-63.

[36] Ibn al-Kalbi, *Asnam*, pp. 16, 36; Jeremy Johns (1999), "The 'House of the Prophet' and the Concept of the Mosque," in Jeremy Johns (ed) *Bayt al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and Early Islam*, pp. 59-112 (p. 96). Al-Shawkani posits that *tawaghit* (singular: *taghut*) refers to the shrines of pre-Islamic idols: *Nayl al Awtar*, iii, p. 542.

[37] Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 450; al-Bayhaqi (2003), *al-Sunan al-kubra*, ed. by M. 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata, 3rd ed., 11 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, *hadith* no. 4307; Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 743.

[38] This is one of the reasons why many scholars believe that the term *masjid* is used in the Qur'an in a general, rather than specific, sense. See Qur'an 2:144, 149, 150, 191, 196, 217; 5:97; 8:34; 9:7, 19, 28; 17:1; 22:25; 48:25; 48:27. Verse 2 in *surat al-Ma'ida* (no. 5) mentions both al-Masjid al-Haram and al-Bayt al-Haram. The Qur'an also refers to a place in Muzdalifa called al-Mash'ar al-Haram: 2:198.

[39] See al-Bukhari, *hadiths* nos. 1189, 1197, 1846, 1995.

[40] See Haithem F. Ratrout, Khaled F. Qamhieh and Khalid El-Awaisi (2023), "Constructing the Shape of the 'Holy': The Umayyad Conception of al-Masjid al-Aqsa's Identity," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 265-290.

[41] Qur'an 9:28.

[42] Muslim, *hadith* no. 1781. See also Imamur Hossain et al. (2015), "Development of Religion Based Community in pre-Islamic Period in Makkah," *Advances in Environmental Biology*, Vol. 9, No. 24, pp. 83-85.

[43] Qur'an 39:3.

Consequently, Muslims continuing the pre-existing Hajj pilgrimage was seen as a restoration of ancient rites, rather than a continuation of pagan practices. Furthermore, Islam added new dimensions to the understanding of the Hajj, including its role as a simulation and foreboding of the people's assemblage on the Day of Judgment, and as a re-enactment of the story of Abraham (the ultimate *hanif* and idol-breaker),[44] his wife Hagar, and infant Ishmael.[45] Under Islam, the rituals of Hajj naturally abjured any veneration of the former idols, and proclaimed robust affirmations of monotheism, beginning with the chant *labbayka Allahumma labbayk*, "O my Lord! Here I am at Your service," *labbayka la sharika lak*, "O my Lord! Here I am, [bearing witness that] there is no partner to You." In pilgrimage, the conviction of Muslim individuals is believed to be subjected to real trial, wherein they are supposed to submissively undertake seemingly inexplicable commands, such as the circumambulation of an ancient structure (i.e., the Ka'ba), the kissing of or pointing to a stone (i.e., the Black Stone) and running between two small knolls (i.e., al-Safa and al-Marwa).

The early Muslim pilgrims, whose communication with paganism was still fresh in the first decades of Islam, were continually reminded that none of these material objects or sites were sacred in themselves, and the sanctified aspect of the Hajj was the performance of the commanded rituals. Similarly, Muslims do not revere the pebbles they throw (*jimar*), nor demean the rock which they stone. The Prophet is reported to have said: "It is only for the remembrance of God that circumambulating the House [i.e., Ka'ba], walking between al-Safa and al-Marwa and throwing pebbles have been made."[46] The familiar non-Islamic trope that the veneration of the Black Stone in Islam represents a clear continuation of pre-Islamic idolatry is contradicted by the fact that the same stone, unlike the idols around the Ka'ba that were venerated and sacrificed to by pre-Islamic worshippers (*supra*), was never an object of worship at any time or by any clan in the *jahiliyya* era.

Furthermore, the stone is accorded respect in Islam not because of its inherent qualities, but because of the belief that it originated in Paradise, and (more importantly) that it would be a witness over the people on the Day of Judgement.[47] 'Umar b. al-Khattab is reported to have said, after kissing the Black Stone (*al-hajar* or *al-rukn al-aswad*): "Verily, I realize that you are (no more than) a piece of stone that brings about neither harm nor benefit, and I would never kiss you unless I saw the Prophet doing so."[48] This *hadith* stands out as the most accepted and most recurrent in the six canonical *hadith* compilations as far as the prestige and merit of the Black Stone are concerned. It is the only one to be reported on the subject by al-Bukhari, Muslim and Abu Dawud.

What about the Ka'ba itself? The Ka'ba enjoys an exceptional status in Islam.[49] It represents the *qibla*, the direction of prayer, of the Muslim people wherever they are in the world, and is regarded as the holiest of all mosques. Many verses in the Qur'an and a whole subsection of *hadith* underscore the exceptional sanctity of this supreme Abrahamic shrine and explain the *ahkam*, 'regulations', relating to its *haram*, 'sanctum'.[50] The question is: how did the Prophet and his immediate followers pay the proper homage to the Ka'ba, while maintaining their resistance to the veneration of any material object? Quite a number of

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[44] Qur'an 6:74; 14:35; 21:57; 22:30-1; 29:17, 25.

[45] Al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 3364-3365; Ahmad b. Hanbal (1995), *al-Musnad*, Ahmad M. Shakir and Hamza A. al-Zayn (eds.), 20 vols., Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, *hadiths* no. 2707, 2795; Ibn Khuzayma (1980), *Sahih*, M. Mustafa al-A'zami (ed.), 4 vols., Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, *hadith* no. 2967; 'Abd al-'Azim al-Mundhiri (2003), *al-Targhib wa-l-tarhib*, M. Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Mashhur Al Salman (eds.), 4 vols., Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'arif, ii, p. 500; Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1977), *Asrar al-hajj*, M. 'Ali (ed.), Sidon: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, pp. 152-155.

[46] Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 1888; al-Tirmidhi, *hadith* no. 902. For an interesting comparison between pilgrimage in Christianity and Islam, see Kahar Wahab Sarumi (2018), "Between Hajj and the Christian Pilgrimage: Parallels, Contrasts, and Implications for Nigeria," *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 1-11. See also Zilya R. Khabibulina (2016), "From the Ural to Hejaz: Muslims' Travel to Islamic Holy Places," *Ural'skij Istoriceskij Vestnik*, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 105-112.

[47] Al-Tirmidhi, *hadiths* no. 877-878; al-Nasa'i, *hadith* no. 2938; Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 2944; al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, i, pp. 443-457; al-Waqidi, *Maghazi*, ii, p. 834.

[48] Al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 1597, 1605, 1610; Muslim, *hadiths* no. 3067-72; Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 1873; al-Tirmidhi, *hadiths* no. 860-1; al-Nasa'i, *hadith* no. 2939-41; Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 2943.

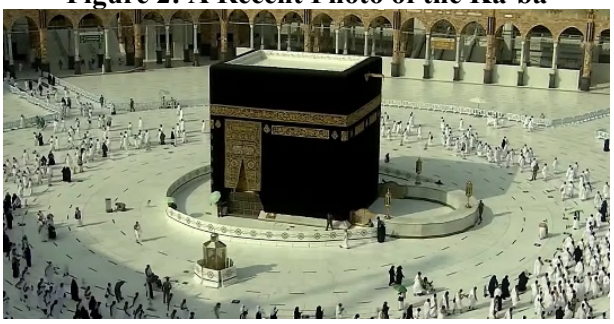
[49] See A. J. Wensinck (1997), "Ka'ba: the Most Famous Sanctuary of Islam," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, iv, pp. 317-322; Gerald R. Hawting (2003), "Ka'bah," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, iii, pp. 75-80.

[50] On this, see al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, i, pp. 355-736. See also al-Zarkashi (1999), *I'lam al-sajid bi ahkam al-masajid*, M. Maraghi (ed.), 5th ed., Cairo: Ministry of Waqfs, pp. 43-219. One of al-Masjid al-Haram's exclusive regulations is that walking in front of someone while praying, a practice prohibited in every mosque, is permitted in it.

traditions imply that it is space (*makan*) rather than the structure itself (*makin*) that is worthy of veneration.[51] Also, the Prophet is reported to have given more weight to the sanctity of the blood and property of a believer than to that of the Ka'ba structure itself.[52] It is even reported of him to have contemplated pulling down the Ka'ba in order to rebuild it on the foundations once set by Abraham, but we have no report to say that he realized such a scheme; his only reason not to do so being his consideration of the people's recent contact with paganism. The Prophet was reportedly concerned that they would take this as encroachment upon the sanctity of the Holy Sanctuary.[53]

There are no reports that he undertook or commissioned any special adornment of embellishment of the Ka'ba other than draping Yemeni fabrics upon it, and this practice has continued to the present (Figure 2).[54] 'Umar b. al-Khattab was the first to undertake any building work, with the addition of a surrounding enclosure wall, as recorded by al-Azraqi.[55]

Figure 2: A Recent Photo of the Ka'ba



Other Places for the Worship of God

Under Islam, places of worship of the Abrahamic God, particularly Judaic synagogues and Christian churches, were not usually allowed to be demolished. Nonetheless, there are cases where some of these were converted into mosques. Is that legal in Islam? Was it a regular procedure? These and other questions of relevance are dealt with in detail in a recent chapter of mine, which discusses the adaptation of pre-existing sacred spaces to early Islam.[56] Meanwhile, it may be important here to refer to the reports on the early Muslim conquerors—particularly in the territories subdued according to a treaty (*sulh*^{an}) rather than by force (*'anwat*^{an}) needing acquiescence from the Christian locals prior to transforming a church into a mosque.[57] This seems quite attuned to the Hanbalis believing that prayer would not be valid if conducted

[51] See al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, i, pp. 66-68, 74-96 (96); al-Fasi (2008), *Shifa' al-gharam bi-akhbar al-balad al-haram*, A. 'Umar (ed.), 2 vols., Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, i, pp. 153-159; al-Zarkashi, *I'lam al-sajid*, pp. 43-50; al-Jura'i (2004), *Tuhfat al-raki' wa-l-sajid bi-ahkam al-masajid*, Salih Salim al-Naham, Muhammad Bani al-Matayri, Sabah 'Abd al-Karim al-'Anzi et al. (eds.), Farawaniyya: Wazarat al-Awqaf wa-l-Shu'un al-Islamiyya, pp. 53, 60, 67. The issues of religious images, idolatry, iconophilia, iconoclasm, iconophobia, iconicity, etc. were in the heart of early Muslim-Christian polemics. See J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, pp. 43-138; S. H. Griffith (2008), *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 41, 53, 59-60, 78, 142-15l, 156-179.

[52] Al-Sakhawi (1979), *al-Maqasid al-hasana*, A. Muhammad al-Siddiq and A. 'Abd al-Latif (eds.), Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilimiyya, p. 340, *hadith* no. 881. The meaning of this *hadith*, whose authenticity is disputed, is enhanced by another more accepted one, stating that the assassination of a believer is more despicable in the eye of God than the destruction of the whole world (with all sacred places included). Al-Nasa'i, *hadith* no. 3986; al-Shafi'i (n.d.), *al-Umm*, Hassan 'Abd al-Mannan (ed.), Riyadh: Maktabat al-Afkar, *hadith* no. 1926.

[53] Al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 1583, 3368, 4484, 7243; Muslim, *hadiths* no. 3240-3249; al-Muqaddasi (1994), *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions: a Translation of Ahsan al-Taqasim fi Ma'rifat al-Aqalim*, Basil Anthony Collins (trans.), reviewed by Muhammad Hamid al-Tai, Doha: Centre for Muslim Contribution to Civilization; Reading: Garnet, p. 74.

[54] Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, i, pp. 356-357.

[55] Al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, i, pp. 593-594. See also J. Pedersen et al. (1991), "Masdjid," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vi, pp. 660, 665; Abdelrahman, "Early Congregational Mosques," p. 292.

[56] See Essam Ayyad (2022), "Sacred Spaces: Adaptation and Early Islam," in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 349-384. While not exclusively from a juridical perspective, some of these issues (i.e., conversion, *spolia*) are discussed in M. Guidetti (2016), *In the Shadow of the Church: The Building of Mosques in Early Medieval Syria*, Leiden: Brill; Mattia Guidetti (2013), "The Contiguity between Churches and Mosques in Early Islamic Bilad al-Sham," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 229-258. See also D. Behrens-Abouseif (2014), "Between Quarry and Magic: The Selective Approach to Spolia in the Islamic Monuments of Egypt," in Alina Payne (ed.), *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean: Portable Archaeology and the Poetics of Influence*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 402-425; Finbarr B. Flood (2006), "Image Against Nature: Spolia and Apotropia in Byzantium and the Dar al-Islam," *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 143-166.

[57] For example, see al-'Umari (1924), *Masalik al-absar fi mamalik al-amsar*, Ahmad Zaki Pasha (ed.), Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, i, p. 180.

on usurped land or property.[58] Moreover, based on the available textual and archaeological evidence, the repurposing of non-Muslim places of worship into mosques during early Islam cannot be construed as a deliberate or consistent strategy.[59]

Places Made Holy as Mosques

What Constitutes a Mosque?

According to Islamic customs, the mosque is a designated space, often a constructed edifice, where Muslims gather on a daily basis to conduct congregational prayer. Whether individual or collective, prayer in Islam can in principle be performed anywhere, except where categorically prohibited. The Prophet is reported to have said: "The whole earth is made a mosque for me (and my nation)."[60] This is ascribed by a number of scholars to the fact that the earth is quintessentially clean, and is continually purified by the incessant act of such natural atmospheric cleansing processes caused by sunlight, wind, and rain, and it does not require special sanctification prior to be used for prayer.[61] Consequently, the *masjid* is simply a 'place of prostration', and conventional characteristic mosque architecture comprises optional extras (and sometimes later add-ons in some cultural contexts).[62] The locations identified as unsuitable for prayer, hence *not* appropriate for establishing mosques, include tombs, lavatories,[63] spots where camels kneel (*a'tan al-ibil*),[64] places believed to have been the site of Divine retribution,[65] slaughterhouses, garbage disposal sites, roadways,[66] and the top of the Ka'ba.[67]

The Prophet chose a *mirbad*, 'threshing floor', when establishing the mosque in Medina, which some have considered to suggest an agrarian devotional practice.[68] Jeremy Johns uses this to claim that the mosque was linked to harvest festivals, as found in archetypal religious traditions.[69] However, Arabic lexical analysis of *mirbad* links it to the cattle pen (*zareba*), threshing-floor, and drying facility for dates, all of which pertain to an (agricultural) enclosure.[70] The *mirbad* can be deduced to be either a livestock pen or a threshing-floor by particularizing the genitive, e.g., *mirbad al-ghanam*/*al-tamr* for the *mirbad* of sheep/dates.[71] Sahl and Suhayl's *mirbad* that formed the site for the Prophet's mosque was explicitly categorized by early sources as a *mirbad al-tamr*.[72] Drawing upon corroborating evidence from al-Bukhari, Johns claims that the Prophet performed prayers in *marabid* (pl.) prior to the construction of his *masjid* in Medina; however, the precise term found in al-Bukhari and other compendiums of *hadith* is not *marabid* (مرابد) but *marabiḍ* (مرابض), referring to sheep pens.[73] The decision to choose a *mirbad* as the site for the

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[58] Al-Mirdawi (1956), *al-Insaf fi ma'rifat al-rajih min-l-khilaf 'ala madhhab al-imam al-mubajjal Ahmad b. Hanbal*, M. Hamid al-Faqi (ed.), 12 vols., Cairo: Matba'at al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, i, pp. 491-492. See also Ibn Muflih (2003), *Kitab al-Furu' wa-ma'ahu tashih al-Furu' wa hashiyat Ibn Qundus*, A. A. al-Turki (ed.), 13 vols., Beirut: Mu'ssasat al-Risala; Riyadh: Dar al-Mu'ayyad, ii, p. 117; al-Shawkani (2004), *al-Sayl al-jarrar al-mutadaffiq 'ala hada'iq al-azhar*, Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, p. 104.

[59] See Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, pp. 33, 36, 38.

[60] Al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 438; Muslim, *hadiths* no. 1161-7; al-Darimi, *hadith* no. 1429; Ibn Hanbal, *hadiths* no. 11858, 11727. See also al-Nawawi (1929), *Sahih Muslim bi-sharh al-Nawawi*, 18 vols., Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Misriyya, v, pp. 2-5.

[61] Ibn Hajar, *Fath*, i, p. 534; al-Shawkani, *Nayl al-awtar* ii, p. 233; Ibn Taymiyya (2005), *Majmu' al-fatawa*, 'Amir al-Jazzar and Anwar al-Bazz (eds.), 3rd ed., 37 vols., Mansura: Dar al-Wafa', xxi, pp. 347-348. This opinion is based on a *hadith* of Ibn 'Umar. See al-Tabarani (1995), *al-Mu'jam al-awsat*, Tariq b. 'Awad Allah and 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Husayni (eds.), Cairo: Dar al-Haramayn, *hadith* no. 1181.

[62] Such simplicity was also denoted by Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, p. 31. See also Simon O'Meara (2022), "Sacred Space," in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 341-8.

[63] Al-Darimi, *hadith* no. 1430; al-Tirmidhi, *hadith* no. 317; Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 492; Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 745; Ibn Hanbal, *hadith* no. 11858; Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih hadith* no. 791; al-Baghawi (1983), *Sharh al-Sunna*, Zuhayr al-Shawish and Shu'ayb al-Arna'ut (eds.), 2nd ed., 16 vols., Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, ii, p. 409.

[64] Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 769; Ibn Hanbal, *hadiths* no. 20409, 20434; Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih hadith* no. 795; al-Muttaqi al-Hindi (2005), *Kanz al-'ummal fi sunan al-aqwal wa-l af'al*, Ishaq al-Tibi (ed.), 2nd ed., 2 vols., Beirut: Bayt al-Afkar al-Duwaliyya, *hadith* no. 19169. See also Ibn Muflih, *Furu'*, ii, p. 105.

[65] Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 490.

[66] See al-Baghawi, *Sharh al-Sunna*, ii, p. 412.

[67] Al-Tirmidhi, *hadiths* no. 346, 347. Al-Tirmidhi himself considers this *hadith* as *da'if* (i.e., of weak authenticity) Ibn Maja, *hadiths* no. 746, 7; al-Baghawi, *Sharh al-Sunna*, ii, p. 410; al-Mirdawi, *Insaf*, i, pp. 489-91; Wensinck, *Early Muhammadan Tradition*, p. 191. For a lengthy survey of the locations where prayer is prohibited, see Ibn Muflih, *Furu'*, ii, pp. 105-13.

[68] The sole *hadith* recounting the Prophet's inclination to pray in orchards is widely regarded as *da'if*, i.e. of a low degree of authenticity. See al-Tirmidhi, *hadith* no. 334; Wensinck, *Early Muhammadan Tradition*, p. 191.

[69] Johns, 'House of the Prophet', pp. 81-5. For more on this discussion, see Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 218-20.

[70] Ibn Manzur (1981), *Lisan al-'arab*, A. al-Kabir, M. A. Hasab Allah and H. M. al-Shadhili (eds.), review edition, 6 vols., Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, iii, pp. 1555-6.

[71] Al-Zamakhshari (1998), *Asas al-balagha*, Muhammad B. 'Uyun al-Sud (ed.), 2 vols., Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, i, p. 329.

[72] Al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, i, p. 324.

[73] Al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 428; al-Tabari (1967), *Tarikh al-rusul wa-l-muluk*, M. Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim (ed.), 2nd ed., Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, ii, p. 397; Wensinck, *Early Muhammadan Tradition*, p. 154; G. H. A. Juynboll (2007), *Encyclopaedia of Canonical Hadith*, Leiden: Brill, p. 487. See

Prophet's mosque could be more practically rationalized by its even topography, necessitating minimal adjustments to transform it into a hypaethral prayer space.[74]

Johns attempts to link his *marabid*, typically positioned at elevated locations for security and climate reasons etc., dovetail nicely into the elevated sites typically seen as revered locations in the ancient Semitic faith.[75] The problem is that the *mirbad* in Medina (i.e., of Sahl and Suhayl) was never noted to be elevated, and the vicinity in general comprised a lowland where water gathered during rains, described by Ibn Sa'd as *ma' mustanjal*.[76] Larger gatherings, such as the *salat al-'id*, 'feast prayer', and *salat al-istisqa'*, 'prayer for rain', were performed in the open desert (in a place of prayer referred to as a *musalla*, without any building or enclosure associated with the prayer space).[77] This offers another indication about the minimalist simplicity necessary to constitute a suitable venue for a prayer space in Islam.

Aspects of Mosque Sacredness

The Prophet described mosques as the most beloved places in the world to God,[78] and they are routinely referred to as '*buyut* Allah', 'houses of God'.[79] Ibn 'Abbas reported that the Prophet said: "On Earth, mosques are the houses of God […]."[80] However, this was never understood in a literal sense, nor even in the immanent sense sometimes associated with the Divine Presence in the Israelite Holy of Holies; the mosque is simply a designated space in which God is to be remembered and worshipped. Muslim theology absolutely abhors divine incarnation in the material world, as described previously. Consequently, mosques are attributed to God as a way of exaltation, not to connote any sort of embodiment of the Divine Presence. In the Qur'an, mosques are designated as: "[…] houses [of worship], which God has permitted to be raised to honour; for the celebration, in them, of His name: in them is He glorified in the mornings and in the evenings (again and again)."[81]

Early Muslims, and indeed believers throughout history, have sought to devise appropriate ways by which mosques might 'be raised to honour'. It is clear that the Prophet himself generally avoided the embellishment and decoration of mosques, including his declining of a scheme to undertake rebuilding with imposing Syrian edifices, even if the funds were to be willingly secured by some of his Companions.[82] The Prophet, it seems, did not want the mosque to be frequented for its attractive form, but for its spiritual calibre. Aside from embodying an ascetic principle, the aversion of beautification of the physical form of mosques can be related back to the early Islamic objective of purging adherents of vestigial traces of venerating the material and profane.[83] *Hadiths* exhorting Muslims to pray at particular mosques refer to spaces imbued with spiritual value, and not physical buildings.[84] This is analogous to the Daoist concept of the worth of a bowl being in its empty space, and not its material form; similarly, the *masjid* is valuable facilitating prostration to God, not in the material form of the corporeal worshippers of the place itself.[85]

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also Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 769; Ibn Hanbal, *hadiths* no. 20409, 20434; Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih*, *hadith* no. 795; al-Hindi, *Kanz*, *hadith* no. 19169. See also Ibn Muflih, *Furu'*, ii, p. 105.

[74] Johns himself acknowledges the same observation: "*marabid* were particularly well-suited as places of prayer because, they had clean, level floors." Johns, "House of the Prophet," p. 82.

[75] Johns, "House of the Prophet," p. 82.

[76] Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, i, p. 205.

[77] On the *musalla al-'id*, see Ibn Zabala (2003), *Akhbar al-Madina*, Salah 'Abd al-Aziz Salama (ed.), Medina: Markaz Buhuth al-Madina, pp. 136-137; al-Samhudi (1997), *Khulasat al-wafa bi akhbar aar al-mustafa*, M. M. al-Jakni (ed.), 2 vols., Medina: Habib M. Ahmad, ii, pp. 255-65.

[78] Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih*, *hadith* no. 1293.

[79] Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 1455; Muslim, *hadiths* no. 666, 2699.

[80] This *hadith* is widely seen as week (*da'if*). However, in the Qur'an, God attributes the Ka'ba to Himself: '*bayti'*, 'My own House'. Qur'an 2:125; 22:26. Also, in *hadith*, when the term '*bayt Allah*' is used, then it is the Ka'ba that is exclusively meant.

[81] Qur'an 24:36.

[82] Ibn Zabala, *Tarikh*, p. 78; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, i, pp. 339; al-Samhudi, *Khulasa*, ii, p. 15; M. J. Kister (1962), "'A Booth Like the Booth of Moses...': A Study of an Early Hadith," *Bulletin of the Society of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 150-155. See also Ibn Rusta (1891), *al-A'laq al-nafisa wa-yalihi Kitab al-buldan li-l Ya'qubi*, M. J. De Goeje (ed.), Leiden: Brill, p. 66; al-Sakhawi (1937), *Tuhfat al-ahbab wa-bughyat al-tullab: fi al-khitat wa-l-mazarat wa-l-tarajim wa-l-biqa' al-mubarakat*, M. Rabi' and H. Qasim (eds.), Cairo: Maktabat al-'Ulum wa-l-Adab, p. 43.

[83] See Essam Ayyad (2015), "A Prophetic Perspective of Mosque Architecture," *The Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 117-172.

[84] Al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 1189, 1197, 1846, 1995.

[85] See Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 295-6.

If mosques are not exclusive places to perform prayers and if they are not meant to be elaborated and ornamented, then in what way were they dignified and honoured, as per the above Qur'an's commandment? In fact, mosques were celebrated via a large body of traditions speaking of their *fada'il*, 'meritorious distinctions', typically indicated by the virtue of attending them for prayer and other aspects of worship.[86] The three supreme mosques (*supra*), in addition to that of Quba', enjoy a significantly privileged prominence.[87] The higher the status of a mosque, the bigger the reward for a prayer in it. However, most of the reports claiming special standing for the mosques of the *amsar*, 'garrison-towns', reflect later discourses and patriotism.[88] Each of these was honoured mainly because it was the central mosque in a newly established Islamic capital. The eminence of any congregational mosque, however, is underlined by the Prophet who is reported, on authority of Anas b. Malik (d. *ca*. 93/712), to have said:

> A man's prayer at his house is counted as one prayer only; his prayer at the tribal [i.e., neighbourhood] mosque is counted as twenty-five prayers; and his prayer at the congregational [i.e., civic] mosque (*alladhi yujamma'u fi-hi*) is counted as five hundred prayers [...].[89]

Meanwhile, a number of modern scholars come to believe that the earliest mosques were not looked upon by the Muslim people of the time as holy places in themselves, seeing that they were repeatedly pulled down and fundamentally rebuilt by later patrons.[90] A look into the sources, however, reveals that such mosques—having been 'ephemeral' structures—had to be pulled down to be given a bigger scale (to accommodate the rising number of worshippers), a sturdier form, and a finer shape.[91] There are numerous cases in historical records of patrons having to explain to a resentful public and religious authorities why a certain mosque needed to be demolished and rebuilt.[92]

The Case of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina

According to Islamic tradition, the Prophet and the earliest Muslim community put up a place for prayer, a mosque, immediately after the *hijra*. A number of modern scholars contrived to doubt this conventional narrative, claiming that some of what they considered to be profane activities that reportedly took place in the building would not be suitable for a 'holy' place.[93] They thus claimed that what the Prophet built was not a mosque; rather, it was a personal dwelling for himself and his family. However, this anachronistic claim ignores the fact that the mosque was initially a multi-purpose space performing a variety of social functions in addition to being a venue for prayer.[94] The more sacralised character of the mosque clearly emerged during later periods, particularly commensurate with the development of Islamic jurisprudence pertaining to purification, prayer, and the mosque itself during subsequent centuries.[95] Some of the

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[86] These include *I'tikaf*, 'devotional retreat', and *dhikr*, 'remembrance of the names and attributes of God'.

[87] On the merits of these major mosques, see Ibn Maja, *hadiths* no. 1404-1413.

[88] Most of the *kutub al-buldan* typically start with reports (often attributed to the Prophet, *sahabis*, or *tabi'is*) detailing the supreme virtues of a specific town and its congregational mosque.

[89] Ibn Maja, *hadith* no. 1413; Ibn Muflih, *Furu'*, ii, p. 454. Regarding the rewards and blessings of praying at communal mosques, see al-Nawawi, (1980), *Kitab al-Majmu': Sharh al-Muhadhdhab li-l Shirazi*, M. N. al Muti'I (ed.), 23 vols., Jeddah, iv, p. 92; al-Zarkashi, *I'lam al-Sajid*, p. 376; al-Sarakhsi (n.d.), *Kitab al-Mabsut*, 31 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, ii, pp. 120-1. Although Muslim worshippers can theoretically pray anywhere, they are encouraged to attend the mosque daily for prayers; it is even obligatory for them to attend once a week, i.e., for the Friday sermon. See al-Bukhari, *hadith* no.647; Ibn Hanbal, *hadiths* no. 7542, 9422. See also Malik, *hadiths* no. 322-325, 527-530; Abu Ya'la (1989), *al-Musnad*, H. Salim As'ad (ed.), 2nd ed., Beirut: Dar al-Ma'mun li-l-Turath, *hadiths* no. 1011, 1361, 5076, 6156; al-Darimi, *hadiths* no. 1312-3; Ibn Hajar, *Fath*, ii, pp. 271-76; Ibn Muflih, *Furu'*, ii, p. 419; Wensinck, *Early Muhammadan Tradition*, pp. 155, 192-193.

[90] For example, see Johns, "House of the Prophet," p. 108.

[91] Al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, ii, pp. 482, 489. See also Ibn Zabala, *Akhbar al-Madina*, p. 114; Ibn al-Najjar, *Durra*, p. 171; al-Maraghi (1955), *Tahqiq al-nusra bi-talkhis ma'alim dar al-hijra*, M. al-Asma'i (ed.), Medina: al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, p. 46. The same viewpoint was embraced by several early jurisconsults, such as Ahmad b. Hanbal and Sufyan al-Thawri. See Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali (1996), *Fath al-Bari: Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari*, M. S. 'Abd al-Maqsud et al., 10 vols., Medina: Maktabat al-Ghuraba' al-Athariyya, iii, pp. 287-289. See also Ibn Hanbal, *hadith* no. 330; al-Hindi, *Kanz*, *hadith* no. 23080; Ibn al-Najjar *Durra*, p. 170; al-Matari (1953), *al-Ta'rif bi-ma ansat al-hajra min ma'alim dar al-hijra*, A. al-Khayyal (ed.), Damascus: As'ad Tarabzuni, p. 80; al-Maraghi, *Tahqiq*, p. 45; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, ii, pp. 481-2, 502-3; al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, p. 80; al-Harbi (1969), *Kitab al-Manasik wa-amakin turuq al-hajj wa-ma'alim al-Jazira*, Hamad al-Jasir (ed.), Riyadh: Dar al-Yamama, p. 361; Spahic Omer (2017), "The Expansion of the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah by Caliph al-Walid (d. 97 AH/ 715 CE) as an Epitome of the Evolution of Muslim Architecture," *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 209-235.

[92] Meanwhile, this narrative could reflect a subsequent discussion attributed to the Prophet's recollection.

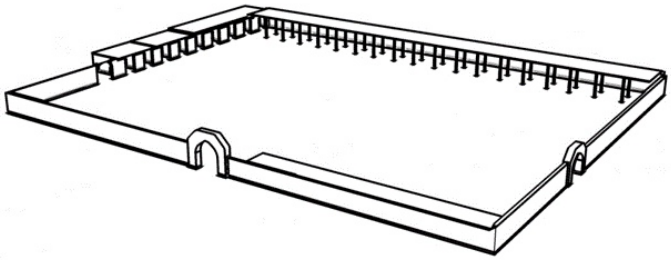
[93] Leone Caetani (1905-26), *Annali dell'Islam*, 10 vols., Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, i, pp. 437-8, 447-60; iii, p. 965. For a systematic discussion of this topic, see Ayyad, "House or Mosque," pp. 273-334.

[94] See Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 646. For an exploration of the diverse roles played by mosques in early Islam, see Alfred Guillaume (1924), *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 39.

[95] For examples of such functions, see al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 421-423, 439-440, 454-457, 461-446, 472, 475; Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih*, *hadiths* no. 1328-1342.

activities undertaken in the Prophet's mosque encompassed things later associated with custom-built buildings, such as the Dar al-Imara of the civic offices in classical Islamic cities. This partly reflected the lack of dedicated infrastructure for diverse functions in political and societal contexts; the mosque in Medina was itself very simple (Figure 3), but it was nevertheless the only major building recorded to have existed in the town.

Figure 3: Isometric Reconstruction of the Prophet's Mosque (After Hillenbrand 1994)

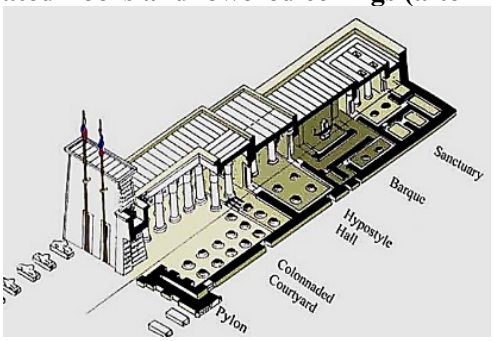


In the mosque, the Prophet received ambassadors, held military councils, raised public funds, and dispensed justice among his followers.[96] Social and community activities were also abundant, such as distributing gifts,[97] conversing, and sleeping.[98] Early Islam made no absolutist distinction between the sacred and profane (if anything, it imbued everything with sacred value). Consequently, educational, societal, community, and administrative and legal activities were all conducted within the *masjid*, before or after times of prayer, and the activities of social cohesion and building the emerging Islamic state were not seen as separate from the sacred and essential importance of the performance of prayer itself.[99] Consequently, assumptions about sacred activities that emerged from the third/ninth century onwards ought not to be projected onto the milieu of the first century AH.[100]

At variance with common practices, the religio-political role of the Prophet's mosque did not confer upon it any degree of exclusiveness. Generally, the mosque does not have an equivalent of the ancient 'holy of holies', an area that is off-limits except to a sacerdotal elite caste, nor does the mosque culture develop any distinction in sacred.ess between the *makshuf*, 'open space', and *mughatta*, 'covered space'.[101] The fact that, in the beginning, the shaded front (*zulla*) of the Prophet's mosque was looked upon as more sacred than the open courtyard (*rahba*), is ascribed to the former being more frequently used for prayer. In the beginning, the courtyard was not regarded as an integral part of the mosque.[102] Subsequently, as prayer sessions in it gained regularity,[103] the entire expanse of the mosque premises was uniformly treated as sacred. The conception of a sacred space, in this sense, is not due to restricted access, such as the ancient Egyptian temples with progressive zones of restricted and increasingly elite access (Figure 4). Instead, the sanctity of mosque spaces originated from the *salah*, 'prayer', performed by human worshippers within them, and not by the spaces themselves.[104]

[96] The Qur'an itself mentions the dispensation of justice at the mosque, for example: 5:106.
[97] See al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 421. See also Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 646.
[98] Al-Bukhari, *hadiths* no. 451-475.
[99] L. Golvin (1960), *La Mosquée: ses Origines, sa Morphologie, ses Diverse Functions-son Rôle dans la Vie Musulmane*, Algiers, Institut d'Études Supérieures Islamiques d'Alger, pp. 97-9; Nabia Abbott (1957-72), *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*, 3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ii, p. 13.
[100] E. Ayyad (2013), "The 'House of the Prophet' or the 'Mosque of the Prophet'?," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 306-308, Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 206-207.
[101] On the dichotomy of *makshuf vs*. *mughatta*, see Pedersen, "Masdjid," pp. 654-655; Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture*, pp. 32, 35.
[102] Al-Zarkashi, *I'lam al-sajid*, p. 383.
[103] Historical evidence suggests that despite this surge, the Prophet consistently expanded the mosque multiple times to accommodate the speedily increasing number of worshippers.
[104] Ayyad, "House of the Prophet," p. 309; Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, pp. 170-172.

Figure 4: Isometric layout of Knonsu Temple (Karnak, Luxor), showing increasing 'holiness' in darker shades with elevated floors and lowered ceilings (after Ziegler and Bovet, 2001)



Places Made Holy for Their Association with the Prophet's Memory

In addition to Medina's principal mosque, the Prophet is reported to have established several additional mosques that were accorded varying levels of prestige by subsequent generations, depending on how compellingly each was linked with the Prophet's biography. For example, when approaching Medina during his migration from Mecca, the Prophet founded the first mosque at Quba', which he dedicated to the Muslim tribe of Banu 'Amr b. 'Awf.[105] This particular mosque, commonly understood as the one commended in the Qur'an for its establishment based on the principle of 'faithfulness',[106] is reported to have been frequented by the Prophet every Saturday.[107] Likewise, the Prophet reportedly marked out a mosque for the clans of Juhayna and Bali.[108] He is also said to have built a mosque for the Banu Mazin b. al-Najjar,[109] a small mosque during the battle of Khaybar (7/628-9), and another one at Liyya while laying extended siege to the clans of Hawazin and Thaqif at al-Ta'if (8/630).[110]

Meanwhile, during the time of the Prophet, it was also anticipated that Muslim clans would establish their respective mosques. Samura b. Jundub reported: "The Prophet demanded us to build mosques in our *dur*, 'communities of kinship' […]."[111] Such tribal mosques encompassed those associated with the tribes of Banu Salima, Sa'd b. Bakr, Zafar, Qurayza, Haritha, Wa'il, and Haram.[112] While a mosque did not have to be sanctioned by the Prophet to be used for formal prayer, all tribes were eager to elicit his approval of their mosques, and the honour of him praying within them. The story of the notorious Masjid al-Dirar, for instance, does connote that the Prophet was, at times, invited to 'sanction' a newly established mosque by visiting and praying within it.[113] This mosque, nonetheless, soon proved to have been founded out of jealousy and indocility by the Banu Ghanm b. 'Awf, the rival cousins of Banu 'Amr b. 'Awf.

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[105] Ibn al-Najjar, *Durra*, p. 112; Ibn Sayyid al-Nas (1992), *'Uyun al-athar fi funun al-maghazi wa-l-shama'il wa-l-siyar,* M. al-Khatrawi and Muhyi al-Din Mistu (eds.), 2 vols., Medina: Maktabat Dar al-Turath, i, p. 313; Ibn Hisham, *Sira* ii, p. 136. See also al-Baladhuri (1957), *Futuh al-buldan*, A. Anis al-Tabba' and U. Anis al-Tabba' (eds.), Beirut: Dar al-Nashr li-l Jami'iyyin, p. 9.

[106] Qur'an 9:108.

[107] Al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, i, pp. 250-252.

[108] Ibn Shabba (1979), *Tarikh al-Madina al-munawwara*, Fahim M. Shaltut (ed.), 4 vols., Makka: H. M. Ahmad, i, pp. 63-64; al-Tabarani (1983), *al-Mu'jam al-kabir*, Hamdi A. al-Salafi (ed.), 25 vols., Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyya, *hadiths* no. 1786-7; al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, p. 207; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, pp. 855-856; Salih al-'Ali (1990), *al-Hijaz fi sadr al-Islam: dirasat fi ahwalih al-'umraniyya wa-l-idariyya*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risala, pp. 546-547.

[109] Ibn Shabba, *Tarikh al-Madina*, i, p. 76; al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, p. 210; Qutb al-Din (1998), *Tarikh al-Madina*, M. Zaynuhum M. 'Azab (ed.), Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyya, p. 146.

[110] Al-Waqidi, *Maghazi*, ii, p. 643, iii, 924; al-Diyarbakri (1885), *Tarikh al-khamis fi ahwal anfas nafis*, 2 vols., Cairo: Matba'at 'Uthman 'Abd al-Raziq, ii, pp. 59-60; al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, p. 224; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, p. 1034.

[111] Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 456; Ibn Hanbal, *hadith* no. 20060; al-Bayhaqi, *hadith* no. 4309; Wensinck, *Early Muhammadan Tradition*, p. 154. Although conveyed through a chain of weak transmitters, this *hadith* finds support in another narration of the same meaning attributed to 'A'isha. See al-Tirmidhi, *hadith* no. 594; Abu Dawud, *hadith* no. 455; al-Bayhaqi, *hadith* no. 4308; Ibn Maja, *hadiths* no. 758; Ibn Khuzayma, *Sahih*, *hadith* no. 1294; Abu Bakr al-Bazzar (1988-2006), *al-Bahr al-zakhkhar al-ma'ruf bi-Musnad al-Bazzar*, M. Zaynullah A. Sa'd (ed.), 15 vols., Medina: Maktabat al-'Ulum wa-l-Hikam, *hadith* no. 4622; al-Baghawi, *Sharh al-sunna* ii, p. 399; al-Khattabi (1933), *Ma'alim al-sunan: sharh 'Sunan al-Imam Abi Dawud (d. AH 275)'*, M. Raghib al-Tabbakh (ed.), 4 vols., Aleppo: al-Matba'a al-'Ilmiyya, i, p. 142.

[112] Al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, pp. 819-80. See also Essam Ayyad (2017), "Revisiting K.A.C. Creswell's Theory on the First Mosque in Islam," *Journal of Islamic Architecture*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 188-195.

[113] Qur'an 9: 107-8. See also Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 649; Michael Lecker (1995), *Muslims, Jews, and Pagans: Studies on Early Islamic Medina*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 74-146.

Furthermore, the Prophet was approached by a delegation from the recently converted Banu Hanifa tribe, requesting the water left over from his ablution. Their intention was to spatter it across the floor of their owned church, to consecrate it as a mosque. Likewise, the mosque of the Banu Zurayq was occasionally visited by the Prophet.[114] Another mosque sanctioned by the Prophet is the one established by 'Itban b. Malik, a visually impaired Ansari Companion who tended to lead his folks in prayer at their designated mosque, but who later asked for permission to pray at his own 'private mosque' when rain made it difficult and dangerous for him to venture to the existing community mosque. 'Itban thus wanted his private mosque (in his residence) to be inaugurated by the Prophet, to further emphasize its status and blessings as a place for prayer. Therefore, the Prophet visited him in the company of Abū Bakr and performed two units of prayer (*rak'a*s) collectively at his residence.[115]

In addition to those built, marked out or sanctioned by the Prophet, a number of mosques were erected by his followers to commemorate episodes of his biography.[116] A good example is the Friday mosque, another connected to the Prophet's emigrational itinerary. However, unlike at Quba', this location was not officially declared a mosque when the Prophet used it for prayer. As the Prophet was nearing Yathrib, the midday hour for Friday prayer approached. Consequently, he conducted the Friday sermon, reportedly for the first time, congregationally, alongside the Banu Salim b. 'Awf at a spot in Wadi Ranuna'.[117] Upon the Prophet's departure from their vicinity to Yathrib, they set up a mosque at the same site, symbolizing and commemorating this significant moment in the Prophet's career and their communal life.[118]

After the Prophet's passing, an abundance of mosques were erected in remembrance of pivotal events from his deeply revered legacy.[119] Some were soon built by zealous believers on spots where he was reported to have prayed in the course of battles. Examples included the mosque of al-Fadikh, where the Prophet prayed during the raid against the Banu al-Nadir in 4/625-6,[120] a mosque outside al-Ta'if where he prayed during his besiegement of the city in 8/629-30,[121] and many mosques linked with where he prayed during the Battle of the Confederates in 5/627.[122]

The next generations of believers, who were not blessed enough to see the Prophet, were in fact more eager to commemorate, and give life to, every episode of his biography. The building of mosques was one salient strategy of such commemoration. For instance, various mosques were built where the Prophet was born, his supplication was accepted, he met up with his first followers in secret, he was offered allegiance by the people of Yathrib, his preaching was heard by the jinn, and where he planted his banner in the ground after the conquest of Mecca. The last mentioned, as well as another in Medina, are both called Masjid al-Raya (Mosque of the Banner). In addition, some mosques were dedicated to the Prophet's relics: a mosque in Mina, for example, is said to contain an indentation believed to be from the Prophet's head on a stone.[123] A mosque was even built to commemorate what the people believed were the footprints of his mule.[124]

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[114] Al-Bukhari, *hadith* no. 420; Sa'id b. Mansur (1967), *Sunan*, Habib al-Rahman al-A'zami (ed.), 2 vols., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, *hadith* no. 2956; Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, i, p. 186; Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 649.

[115] Malik, *Muwatta*', *hadith* no. 572; Muslim, *hadith* no. 1496; Ibn Shabba, *Tarikh al-Madina*, i, p. 71; Ayyad, *Making of the Mosque*, p. 204.

[116] Ibn Shabba, *Tarikh al-Madina*, i, pp. 57-79; al-Harbi, *Manasik*, pp. 397-402; Qutb al-Din al-Hanafi, *Tarikh al-Madina*, pp. 131-156; 'Abd al-Quddus al-Ansari (1973), *Athar al-madina al-munawwara*, 3rd ed., Medina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, pp. 80-142; A. Yasin al-Khayyari (1999), *Tarikh ma'alim al-Madina al-Munawwara: qadiman wa-hadithan*, 2nd ed., Medina: al-Amana al-'Amma li-l-Ihtifal bi-Murur Ma'at 'Am 'ala Ta'sis al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya al-Su'udiyya, pp. 92ff; Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 650-651; Miklos Muranyi (2012), "The Emergence of Holy Places in Early Islam: On the Prophet's Track," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 165-171.

[117] Al-Baladhuri, *Futuh*, p. 12; Ibn Shabba, *Tarikh al-Madina*, i, p. 68. See also al-Tabari, *Tarikh*, ii, p. 394. Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, ii, p. 136; Ibn Sayyid al-Nas, *'Uyun al-athar*, i, p. 313.

[118] See al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, pp. 218-219; H. Lammens (1926), "Les Sanctuaires pré-Islamites dans l'Arabie occidentale," *Mélanges de l'Université de Saint-Joseph*, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 119-120.

[119] For a thorough discussion of such mosques, see Munt, *The Holy City of Medina*, pp. 111-115, 126.

[120] Al-Waqidi, *Maghazi*, i, p. 371.

[121] This one is said to have been put up by a certain 'Amr b. Umayya b. Wahb. See al-Waqidi, *Maghazi*, iii, pp. 926-927; Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, iv, p. 121; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, pp. 1034-1035.

[122] Al-Waqidi, *Maghazi*, ii, pp. 440-480.

[123] Jamal al-Din M. Jarallah (1921), *al-Jami' al-latif fi fadl Makka wa-ahliha wa-bina' al-bayt al-sharif*, Cairo: Dar Ihya' al-Kutub al-'Arabyya, p. 335.

[124] Al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, pp. 138-139; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, pp. 827-828.

For some, such reports were concocted long time after the Prophet's passing, showing a distinct tendency to associate later events and constructions with his memoir.[125] Nevertheless, the existence of mosques during the Prophet's era is indisputably confirmed in the Qur'an. Furthermore, the construction of mosques to honour the Prophet's memory is substantiated by the establishment of several mosques explicitly dedicated to this purpose during his lifetime. In early Islamic Arabia, particularly the Hijaz, mosques were also built to celebrate what were thought to be the birthplaces of the Prophet's family members, including his wives Khadija, 'A'isha, and Mariyya, his uncle Hamza, loyal cousin 'Ali, and notable comrades (such as Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and Bilal). Other mosques were dedicated, in different Islamic territories, to Prophets, such as Adam, Abraham, and Ishmael, and eminent Biblical figures whose religious prestige is also established by the Qur'an and *hadith*.[126]

Conclusion

In the earliest Islamic decades, the designation of a place as holy did not connote any degree of intrinsic divinity or divine immanence, but of purity and reverence. This seems well in accord with the context of resisting the edification of any structure or material object—all in the spirit of counteracting the then recent idolatrous practices. Such an approach was evidently applied to the only type of 'holy' place in early Islam, i.e., the mosque. It is true that mosques are referred to by *hadith* as *buyut* Allah (lit. 'houses of God'), but such honorary epithets did not reflect incarnation of any kind or degree. Mosques are also referred to as God's most blessed places on earth. As such, mosques were revered by the earliest Muslim community not because they were perceived to be unique places where God exists, but where He is to be worshiped and dignified in the most dedicated way.

Only three mosques are referred to in the relevant literature as 'sacred sanctuaries': the mosques of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. The Prophet Muhammad declared Medina and its mosque as *haram*, just as the Prophet Abraham had done with Mecca and its mosque. Similarly, the Aqsa mosque is associated with the memory of notable prophets. The elevated status of these three supreme mosques is accentuated by the fact that they are the only ones stipulated as being commendable destinations for 'pilgrimage', with multiplied rewards for prayers performed within them.

In early Islam, sanctity was typically conferred upon a particular place through Qur'anic verses, *hadith*, dedication as a mosque, or its association with the biography of the Prophet. In the following times, however, other places (mainly funerary) were made holy because of later cultural practices. Under Islam, polytheist places of worship were typically destroyed within the Arabian Peninsula (and were certainly not allowed to continue with their pre-Islamic rites); monotheistic ones (i.e., those belonging to the Jews and the Christians) were—in most cases—allowed to survive; and two pre-Islamic places of worship (i.e., al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and al-Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem)[127] were considered Islamic. There are cases where those in the first category were superseded by mosques, and others where those belonging to other monotheistic faiths were shared with local worshippers.[128] Of all Islamic shrines, the Ka'ba enjoys the highest prestige. The veneration of this supreme Abrahamic structure, that is referred to in the Qur'an itself as *the* 'House of God', represents a unique case in Islamic customs.

The devotional, and in sequence architectural, requirements for an Islamic place of prayer are markedly simple. This is well-reflected in the hypaethral arrangement of the Prophet's mosque in Medina. The simplicity of this archetypal mosque, in addition to the 'secular' nature of some of the activities it is reported

[125] Pedersen, "Masdjid," p. 647.

[126] See al-Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, ii, pp. 811-817; al-Matari, *Ta'rif*, p. 141; al-Samhudi, *Wafa'*, iii, pp. 782-784, 825-827, 1020-1021; Salih al-'Ali, *Hijaz*, pp. 540-541; al-Khayyari *Ma'alim al-madina*, pp. 88-91. See also al-Harawi (2002), *al-Isharat ila ma'rifat al-ziyarat*, A. 'Umar (ed.), Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, pp. 38-44; Ibn Zulaq (1999), *Fada'l Misr wa-akhbaruha wa-khawassuha*, 'Ali M. 'Umar (ed.), Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanji, p. 53; al-Sakhawi, *Tuhfat al-Ahbab*, p. 101.

[127] Referred to in the Qur'an (17:1) as the Farthest Mosque, this pan-Islamic sanctuary is also known in the early Muslim tradition as Bayt al-Maqdis. Later on, it came to be known as al-Haram al-Sharif, which is believed by many to correspond to the Temple Mount in Judeo-Christian traditions.

[128] A well-known example of the latter case is the basilica dedicated to St. John the Baptist in Damascus (or rather the ancient Roman Temenos that once included it) from the Muslim conquest in 13/634 down to 87/706 when the Great Umayyad Mosque was erected in the time of al-Walid I.

to have accommodated, have caused a number of modern theorists to think of it as a non-sacred place. Having been the mainstay of the earliest Muslim community, however, the mosque of the Prophet served—beside its foremost role as a place of prayer—other administrative and societal functions. In addition to his mosque, the Prophet is reported to have supervised the foundation of other mosques.

Many mosques were also dedicated to honouring various aspects of the memory of the Prophet and his Companions,[129] especially at sites in which he reputedly prayed. These locales were considered to be imbued with a more holy status by virtue of the Prophet's presence and prayer in them. Such purported sites are exceedingly numerous, and encompass diverse places in which he reportedly prayed in Mecca and Medina (especially before his mosque was built in the latter and the *musalla* was established for exceptional prayers with larger numbers of congregants). Moreover, there are several other sites at which he was reputed to have prayed during travels, expeditions, and battles.[130] Consequently, there are tens of mosques commemorating such incidents, whose foundation dates are sources of contention and debate.[131] In any event, during the Prophet's lifetime and later, mosques did not require sacerdotal sanctification and consecration, and any Muslim community, irrespective of size or place, can establish mosques as their places of prayer.

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[129] On such mosques, see Ibn al-Najjar, *Durra*, pp. 187-191; al-Samhudi, *Khulasa*, ii, pp. 255-353.
[130] See Qutb al-Din, *Tarikh al-madina*, pp. 153-156.
[131] On these, see al-Samhudi, *Khulasa*, ii, pp. 287-354, 469-502.

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