

An Urban Model of Muslim Tradition in Portuguese Cities

VIII - XIII Centuries

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First I will present the different studies that have already been done on the Islamic Model City in different parts of the Arab world. I will finish this paper with a consolidation of Islamic urban characteristics in Portuguese cities.

In the study of the development of the Islamic city archetype we have to distinguish between the different performances and functions of the cultures found in each territory, and the political and economical conditions. The model will not be the same exactly there fore in the Middle East, in Africa or in Portugal.

The model in Magrebe has a spontaneous development of eastern influence, while in the oldest cities of Palestine, and Syria, we find a geometry of greco-roman origin. Jean Sauvaget¹ explained this when he studied Damascus and Aleppo.

Furthermore, we have to consider a very important fact: the Arabs occupied existing cities: "Les Arabes envahissent les côtes méditerranéennes au milieu du VIIe siècle; ils rencontrent d'abord les zones fortement urbanisées de l'Orient hellénistique, s'emparent des villes existantes - Alexandrie, Antioche, Damas, Jérusalem - et les adaptent à leurs exigences²". Many of these cities presented regular structures, perpendicular grids which, had been adapted to the necessities of the new occupants, but also keeping many of the main features of the preexisting city; look at the case in Damascus for example.

Based on the study of Sauvaget, for the Middle East, Aida Youssef traced a plan where suq have a linear form, the mosque does not occupy the central place and the cidadela is situated in the East³.

Like Sauvaget, other investigators have developed their studies aiming to define one archetype for the Islamic city. It is the case of Von Grunebaum with a interesting paper: "The structure of the Muslim Town". It is important to notice that this author studied and read works of Frenchmen who had analysed the situation in Magrebe. He accepted, as main elements of the Islamic city: the mosque, the market place and the baths. He also formulated his model for this city where the main streets cross in a central square, the mosque is built in the main street and the Governor's Palace is located next to the mosque. This structure existed in many cities in the North of Africa.

Of all those who studied the model of the Islamic city the investigator Albert Hourani stands out with the book "The Islamic City"⁴ in 1970, where the first symposiums on the Islamic city, carried out in the 60's are compiled.

Hourani also described the characteristics of a typical Muslim city, with an alcáçova (fortification) situated as a site of natural

¹ Jean Sauvaget, *Esquisse d'une Histoire de la Ville de Damas*, *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, Vol. 8, 1934, pp. 421-480.

² Leonardo Benevolo, *Histoire de la Ville*, Paris, Parenthèses, 1994, p. 153.

³ Aida Youssef Hoteit, *Cultura, Espacio y Organización Urbana en la Ciudad Islámica*, Cuadernos de Investigación Urbanística do Seminario de Planeamiento y Ordenación del Territorio del Instituto Juan del Herrera, Madrid, Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, Departamento de Urbanística y Ordenación del Territorio, Nov. 1993, pp. 12-13.

⁴ A. Hourani e S. Stern, *The Islamic City*, Oxford, Bruno Cassirer, 1970.

⁵ Benevolo, *ob. cit.*, 1994, pp. 153-167.

⁶ Heinz Gaube, *Iranian Cities*, New York, New York University Press, 1979, pp. 18-19.

⁷ Besim Selim Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles*, London, KPI Limited, 1986, p. 15.

⁸ Youssef Khiara, *ob. cit.*, 1993, p. 34.

defence, with a city or royal quarter, a central urban complex, some residential quarters and, of course, suburbs.

Benevolo notes four characteristics present in Islamic cities⁵. These elements, found together only in these cities and are as follows: a reduction of public buildings relating to the preceding city; the existence of only houses or palaces and two more types of public buildings - baths (corresponding to the spas of the Romans) and the mosque - without a similarity in the classical world; the abolition of regularity applied to the cities of old Greece and Rome; the city as a closed compact organism inside one or more walls, divided in to different spaces, the central space being the medina (in this city the different ethnic or religious groups occupy different blocks and the prince inhabits a peripheral zone, protected from the noise); also the use of geometric figures in the architectonic decoration, without the use of human figure for religious features.

Aida Youssef Hoteit refers to other investigators of the Islamic city, Nader Ardlan and Laila Bakhatiar, Heinz Gaube, Besim Hakim. For Ardlan and Bakhatiar, this city is identical to the cosmic structure.

As for Heinz Gaube, four main functions are revealed in the physical form of the city: "the seat of government, the centre of intellectual and religious life, the place of non-agrarian economic activities and the dwelling place of a population which is not employed in the primary sector"⁶.

For Besim Hakim Saddle Muslim law was greatly responsible for the physical form of this city: "The development of building and urban design principles centred primarily around housing and access. Their development paralleled that of Islamic Law, and soon became semi-legislative in nature. (...) Islamic law responded well in fulfilling the demand for building/urban design guidelines and a framework for adjudicating related conflicts." ⁷ Therefore, Youssef Khiara considers that, to understand this urbanism, knowledge of legal clauses and normative rules that determine this architectural production and this type of urban landscape are necessary⁸.

Based on the works of the investigators of the Islamic city certain conclusions can be made: the model of the Middle East is geometric and the Moorish one spontaneous.

The model of the Middle East comes close to the Roman model. It searches for wisdom in pre-Islamic urban traditions. However, this analysis, that was carried out by J. Sauvaget, was based on the study of cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, cities that already had a regular drawing inherited from the Greeks and Romans.

Sauvaget considered, as we can see, the model in the Middle East with geometric characteristics, where the mosque is not in the centre and the market develops along a street, the palace being in an extremity of the city, always the East.

For Magrebe, Von Grunebaum found conclusions that much resembles those found in Portuguese cities, with the mosque

located at the point where main streets cross. However, Von Grunebaum speaks of the proximity of the main mosque and the palace. The study of this investigator includes cities of Syria and Magrebe, resulting in his model of the Islamic city being a compound of the image of these cities. For him the characteristics of the Islamic cities are the main streets crossing in a square and the existence of a mosque in the most important street with the palace of the Governor by its side.

The description of Hourani is perhaps one that applies better to the Portuguese Islamic cities. The palace is built in the highest part of the city. The city has districts and suburbs.

For the model of the Islamic city, in the North of Africa, William Marçais and Georges Marçais noticed the separation of the different functions. For them the separation between commercial districts and residential quarters was clear. Commerce had a hierarchical organisation, the noblest and cleanest being placed proximity of the mosque. The quarters were also structuralized in relation to their ethnic factors or specialisation⁹

According to William Marçais and Georges Marçais, this city is dictated with a defensive function, and this is well visible in the harshness of its walls, in the sumptuous doors and the strategically situated palace.

Aida Youssef Hoteit continues by adding cemeteries and gardens to the exterior of the city and important streets of organising the space inside.

A methodology of analysis was created for the Portuguese cities, where I considered five determinative factors for their urban principles. These factors are: the foundation of the city; the topographical situation; the situation and urban drawing of alcáçova (fortification) and the tracing of the wall of the city; the localisation of the main mosque and the public buildings in the islamic city; the characteristic of the tracing that forms the city and its urban development.

Based on the analysis of 10 study cases in Portugal - Santarém, Lisboa, Elvas (fig. 1), Évora, Alcácer do Sal, Mértola, Silves (fig. 2), Lagos, Tavira (fig. 3) and Faro - I arrived at the conclusion that the model of this Islamic city in Portugal can be defined by the following characteristics (fig. 4 and fig 5):

- The city sits on a hill with a cultural past, that can have origin in one defensive structure followed by roman and visigoth occupation, and in the majority of these cases the pre-existing structures that influenced the Islamic urban mesh are of the roman period;
- The place of occupation was elected for the first people who occupied a defensive hill over a river. In some cases this choice was made during the Iron Age where many of the fortifications were at crossroads and had fertile lands nearby;
- There were 3 different nuclei to the city: alcáçova (palace), the medina and suburbs (some times more than one);
- alcáçova (palace), of polygonal layout with two doors (one for

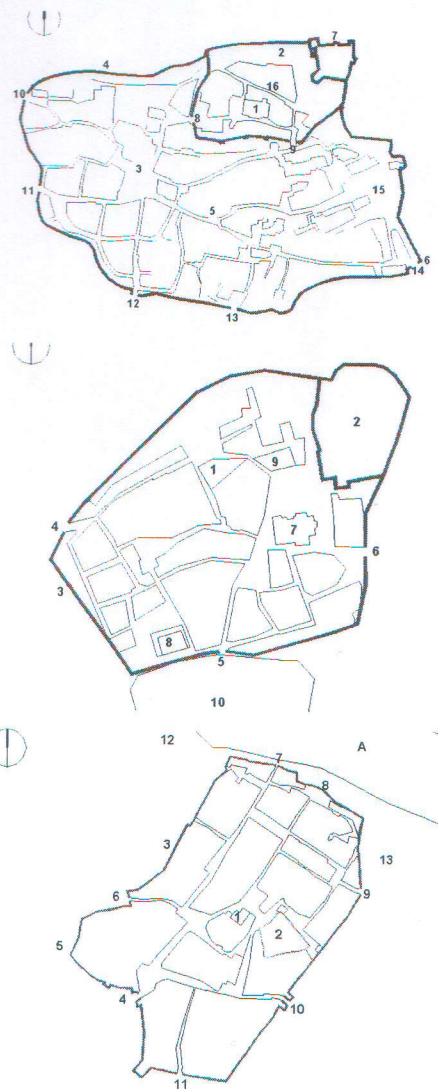


Fig. 1,2,3 Elvas, Silves, Tavira

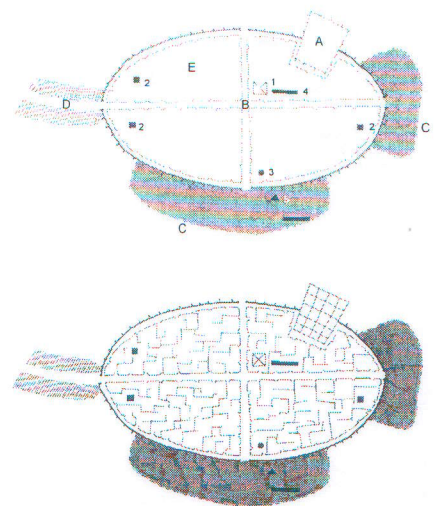


Fig. 4,5 Urban Models of Portuguese Islamic Cities

⁹ Georges Marçais, La Conception des Villes dans l'Islâm, Revue d'Alger, vol.II, 1945, p. 532.

- the interior of the medina and the other for the exterior), which was situated on the raised point of the mount, generally to the Northeast of the city centre and in the most peripheral position, so that the city could easily be abandoned in case of invasion;
- In the space of the alcáçova (palace) the streets are reticulated and related to the wall;
 - The wall of the medina is moored to the wall of the alcáçova (palace) and contains an accumulation of houses situated on the South side of the hill;
 - The wall of the medina normally had 3 or 4 doors and its area approached 7 hectares;
 - The public buildings occupied specific places in the Portuguese Islamic city, distinguishing between the bigger mosque, the mosques of the quarter, the market, the house of cereals, the "alcaçaria" (commercial block), the baths building and lodging-house;
 - The biggest mosque (often inheriting and preceding other religious buildings) is situated in the centre of the town, as well as the market and the house of cereals;
- in the different quarters of the city small mosques can be found; the commercial block was next to the river; the public baths next to one of the city gates and close to the river; and the lodging-house in the exterior of the city;
- The space for the cemetery was built next to the doors of the medina, some times extending along a street that lead to the city;
 - The urban mesh in the interior of the medina was organised into two important streets which crossed in the centre of that space and the other being alleys that led to the private houses;
 - The important streets were distinguished, over all, by the activities that were developed there;
 - The morphology of the land influenced the development of the city, giving origin to the subtypes of the model.

The Archetype of the Islamic city changes in function from place to where it's implanted, even so keeping a certain analogy from one model to another. The main responsible for the diversity of cases being the physical structure of the territory and the cultural preexistences.

*This study it's part of a thesis financed for FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia - Portugal)

THE PLANNED CITY?

ISUF International Conference

Edited by Attilio Petruccioli, Michele Stella,
Giuseppe Strappa



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ISUF International Conference

Proceedings of the International Conference
Trani, 3-6 July, 2003

Edited by Attilio Petruccioli, Michele Stella,
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