

Original Research Article

## Medina and Mecca among the Orientalists (16th-19th century)\*

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Received: 2020/01/21

Accepted: 2020/08/10

Available online: 2020/09/22

**Abstract** | The cities of Mecca and Medina attracted the attention of orientalist as early as the 16th century, but primarily because they were the scene of the birth of Islam and less as eastern urban entities, like Istanbul or Cairo for example. Nevertheless, as these two cities were off-limits to them, it was less through visiting and more through the collation of Arab and Persian sources that scholars came to know them, depending on the orientation of these primary sources. When some travellers were able to visit them, their interest remained focused on the sanctuaries. The history and topography of the sanctuaries were undoubtedly detailed, but the urban organization and social history of the less investigated localities.

**Keywords** | *Geography, Orientalism, Topography, Travel.*

**Introduction** | The cities of Mecca and Medina were for orientalist almost mythical places linked to the birth of Islam, especially as the stay of non-Muslims was forbidden. Nevertheless, from the 16th century onwards, European travellers managed to gather topographical information about them either by passing through them or by collecting Arabic or Persian descriptions of the holy places. These descriptions could obviously be narrative, but there were also graphic representations that allowed some scholars to “draw” views of these cities. The acquisition of this knowledge went hand in hand with the collection and understanding of Arabic and Persian geographical texts. Photography eventually corrected and completed these images.

In this article, we would like to focus on the stages of this geographical and historical approach.

### The first contacts (16th-18th century)

The first western traveller to pass through Medina was Ludovico di Varthema (1470-1517). Italian by birth, he was in Damascus in 1503, from where he left with the pilgrimage caravan to finally reach Aden and then take the boat to India. It was during this journey that he

entered Medina in May 1503, a description of which was published in Rome in 1510 after his return. Thus he devoted several pages (Teyssier, 2004, 57-72) to the description of the mosque where the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions is located. The mosque is described as a square building supported by more than 400 columns. The tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions is located in a square building on the side of the mosque. The engraving that accompanies the description shows a totally imaginary tower (Fig. 1).

As for Mecca, he estimates the city at 600 households, its houses are well built, and the city is without a wall. He situates the mountains surrounding the city, but also notes the poverty of its natural resources. He describes the Ka’ba and the four galleries that surround it, comparing the Ka’ba to a square tower. He also describes the Zemzem well. This is obviously an incomplete, suggestive and superficial description, but it shows a certain curiosity for these places.

When Arabic geographical texts were known in Europe in the 17th century, it was obvious that Medina attracted attention. Thus, Barthelemy d’Herbelot devoted a long notice to Medina in his *Bibliothèque orientale* («Eastern Library») in 1697, where he presents the city as the first capital of Islam, its earlier name of Yathrib and the fact

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Fig. 1. Imaginary representation of the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad according to Ludovico di Varthema. Source: Tessier, 2004.

that it is the burial place of the Prophet as well as of the first caliphs. In fact, this tomb is called Rawḍa “garden”. He mentions the renovation of the mosque under the caliph al-Walīd and then quickly gives the history of the city up to the Ottoman Sultan Selim, who became *khādim al-ḥaramayn* “servant of the two sanctuaries” (d’Herbelot, 1697, 570-571).

As for Mecca, it devotes a long notice to it. He gives its geographical location and adds: “What makes this city the most famous in the world is the birth of Muhammad, the temple of the Ka’ba (...) often also called by Muslims Bayt Allah, or ‘House of God’ and the miraculous well of Zemzem”. And the author introduces its historical development by writing: “Although this city is so highly revered among Muslims, nevertheless, it has not left behind the fact that it has been repeatedly besieged, looted and burned in connection with various revolts that rose up among them”. He goes on to give the political history of the city. Thus, the general situation of the locality is hardly touched upon. He simply says, “The soil of Mecca being covered only with stones and sand, does not produce any kind of fruit” (ibid, 568-570).

The first biographies of the Prophet that were published in Europe in the 18th century also discuss the topography of the places where the Prophet rests, thus John Gagnier (d. 1740) in his biography of the Prophet (Gagnier, 1732, 304-309), specifies the position of his tomb in relation to that of the first two caliphs. He uses for this purpose Arabic sources including the chronicler Abū l-Fidā’ which he had published (ibid) and translated into Latin. At the same time, Jean de la Roque (de La Roque, 1718, 301-302) published in French the description of Arabia from Abū l-Fidā’ where a notice is devoted to the topography of Medina and Mecca.

At the same time, the first performance of Mecca is published in Europe. In 1738, the Englishman Joseph Pitts

(Garcia, 2011, 85-101), published in London, “A faithfull account of the religion and manners of the Mahometans”, in which he recounts his 1680 pilgrimage. He was a sailor who had been taken prisoner in the Mediterranean, had been converted, and had made the pilgrimage of which he leaves a detailed account here. In addition, he gives a description of the sanctuary with the main buildings. Of course, the positions are relative, but one can recognize the whole of the aediculae of the shrine.

Some twenty years earlier, in 1721, Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723) (Grabar, 2001, 268-274) had published in Vienna a work entitled “Project for a history of architecture through representations of several important buildings of antiquity and foreign populations” (*Entwurff einer historischen Architektur in Abbildung unterschiedener berühmten Gebäude des Altertums und fremder Völker*). Mecca is seen as the crow flies, i.e. from a perspective developed by European designers since the 16th century. The author’s legends are sometimes wrong but show the use of a model. The representation here suggests imaginary inventions based on a more realistic but undoubtedly more sober model. It is the mosques that are of primary interest, the surroundings of the building where the city of Medina itself can be guessed are imaginary. The author specifies that he used drawings in the possession of Count von Hulenberrg of Braunschweig, English ambassador in Vienna. He had bought them from an Arab engineer who had been sent to Mecca and Medina by the Ottomans.

Indeed, it is the images coming from Muslim pilgrims that feed these representations. As proof of this, we want a painting of the sanctuary adorning a qibla indicator. Four examples of this astonishing object are known, one preserved in Dublin, another in Venice, a third in Vienna and the last in Cairo (Porter, 2012, 66; O’Kane, 2012, 266-267). The first two date from 1738 and the last one from 1738. Both paintings give a bird’s-eye view of the Mecca shrine. The author, whose name is al-Bārūn al-Mukhtārī ‘Baron the Inventor’, probably an Armenian name, speaks of his interest in geography and astronomy and says that he gave the Grand Vizier Ali Pasha a treatise on geography in 1733. He was then asked to make an indicator for the qibla and finished it in 1738. We can be certain here of the European cartographic influence or at least of the views of cities, but this painter certainly did not set foot in Medina, let alone Mecca. What could he have been inspired by? An error<sup>1</sup> indicates that he used an image of the shrine from another work: the *Futūḥ al-ḥaramayn* (written in 911/1505-1506) from Muḥyī al-Dīn Lārī (Porter, 2012, 46-47), which disseminates a genuine iconographic programme relating to the holy places with a series of seventeen or eighteen images, it is a work written in Persian for Sultan Muzaffar b. Maḥmūd

Shāh. It is a poetic description of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the rites of pilgrimage. The large number and antiquity of the manuscripts, many of which are copied in Mecca (Fig. 2, Persian Bnf ms. 237, f. 42r). The painter did not hesitate to use many colours, which gives a shimmering effect to the image. The ground of the courtyard is suggested by a light speckle on which the iconographic elements stand out clearly. Here we are completely within the painting techniques of the manuscripts. The resemblance of the copies scattered in the libraries suggests the use of stencils.

The view is south-facing. We have several types of perspectives with also objects seen in elevation. The general perspective is a register perspective, meaning that the objects at the bottom of the image are close to the observer and the higher you go in the image, the further away you get. The minarets and the tomb of the prophet are shown in elevation, while the east and west galleries are projected outwards. These galleries have several doors while all the arcades receive a hanging lamp. These galleries are drawn double and superimposed, which is a mistake from an architectural point of view but this is the graphic principle used to show the two façades of the gallery. The upper banner shows the exterior façade, surmounted by crenellations, while the lower

banner shows the façade overlooking the courtyard. We find the error already pointed out in the representation of the courtyard, which seems to be divided in two by an inner gallery. The north gallery has an anonymous door while the others have captioned elements. The west gallery shows three elements: Gabriel's door (*Bāb Jibrā'il*), the women's door (*Bāb al-nisā'*) and Gabriel's window (*Shubbāk Jibrā'il*). The southern gallery shows the mihrab of 'Uthmān while the eastern gallery shows only one name 'Bāb al-salām', the door through which the visit to the mosque began.

Several aedicules were represented in the courtyard on the principle of elevation perspective: the treasury (*Qubbat khazīna, sic.*), the dome al-Zayt (*Qubbat al-zayt*) where, according to tradition, one of the Korans of 'Uthmān was kept as well as the palm tree or tree of Alī or garden of Fātima.

In the mosque itself, the tomb of Fātima (*Hujrat Fātima Zahrā*) was indicated to us: following the fire of 1481, work had been undertaken in 888/1483-84 during which an anonymous tomb was discovered and it was attributed to Fātima. On the right we have "the Garden" (*al-Rawḍa*): in fact this refers to the space between the minbar and the tomb where the Prophet liked to be, according to tradition. Under the arcades of the gallery that opens the prayer hall is the "Space of the Elders" (*Maḥalla al-makbirīn*) - the meaning and function of the place is not clear to us - and inside this room, the minbar seen from the side, and two mihrabs. The mihrab of the Prophet (*Mihrāb al-Nabī*) was inserted into a masonry during the restoration work of 888/1483-84 (Sauvaget, 1947, 47) and the new mihrab (*mihrāb jadīd*) or the mihrab of Sulaiman (*Mihrāb al-Sulaymāniyya*), built in 957/1550-51. Finally, we have the tomb of the Prophet (*Qubbat Rasūl Allāh*) as the predominant element. In 889/1484, Qā'itbāy had a dome built, which was covered in 946/1536 with copper plates. The painter, in order to give the illusion of the roundness of the dome, introduced a deformed dormer window into the roof.

This image constructed to show the "hidden" elements inside the mosque of Medina is indeed the origin of the perspective representations made in Istanbul or elsewhere in the Muslim world by designers familiar with European drawing techniques. All they had to do was "lift" and give depth to the buildings, which he saw in two dimensions. The testimony of Carsten Niebühr, who gave the representations of the two holy cities in his *Description of Arabia*, is cited as proof of this. At the beginning of the representation of the Mekke, he states: "Although the Mohammedans do not allow Christians to go to the Mekke, they do not deny them the description of their Ka'ba; they show it to foreigners, and tell them all the ceremonies that their law prescribes for pilgrims.



Fig. 2. View of Medina in *Futūh al-haramayn*. Source: Paris Persian Bnf ms. 237, f. 42r.



I copied a drawing of the Ka'ba from an Arabic book in Kâhira, which I then perfected on the basis of the accounts of people I knew who went from Jeddah to the Mekke, or who had often been there; finally, I finished it as Plate 21 from the work of a Turkish painter, who had spent eight years in the Mekke, and who had earned his living by selling drawings of the Ka'ba to the pilgrims. I have removed all the houses around the temple that were marked on the painter's drawing" (Niebürh, 1779, II, 227). And when he illustrates Medina (Fig. 3), he adds: "Following the drawing of an Arab, which I copied and placed in the 22nd plate, the building above the tomb of Mahomed and the first caliphs, is not in the middle like the Ka'ba, but in the corner of a large mosque. In the original, there were three gold stripes on the fence, by which the designer wanted to mark that this building contained three tombs" (ibid II, 242).

This confirms the presence of painters in the Mekke style during the Ottoman period who created representations for pilgrims, as a "souvenir" of their passage, and it also indicates that a draughtsman -here Carsten Niebürh- could have been perfectly inspired to draw them in perspective afterwards. Moreover, Niebürh's last remark about the three golden lines representing the tombs in Medina shows that he had before his eyes a traditional image, of the kind that illustrated the *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* of Muḥammad al-Gazūlī (d. 869/1465) (Fig. 4, Marseille, ms. Ms. 1634, f. 54r, Tombs of the Prophet, BMVR of Marseilles, Rare and Precious Fonds).

Finally, Ignace Mouradja d'Ohsson (1740-1807) published in Paris in 1787-1790 a General Table of the Othoman

Empire in two volumes. Volume two shows a view of Medina and a view of the city of Mecca. Although the sanctuary is still at the centre of the picture, urban realities are also shown.

### The historical and topographical approach of the city (19th century)

In the 19th century, the ease of travel made it possible for many western explorers to make the pilgrimage and visit Medina.

Domingo Badia y Leblich thus made the pilgrimage under the name of Ali Bey in 1807, whose account he published in French in 1814. He was the first European to give a precise description and plans of Mecca and the Ka'ba (Bey, 1993, II, 74-104). Although he had wanted to, he failed to visit Medina and returned via Yanbo and Suez.

Among those who left descriptions, the first is the Swiss Jean-Louis Burckhardt (1784-1817) who visited Mecca as a pilgrim in 1812 and also visited Medina (Burckhardt, 1829, 102-170, 321-361). He left a detailed description of Mecca, its quarters and the Ka'ba. He compares, for example, the names of the gates given by al-Azraqī with the names he knows. Finally, he also gives in translation extracts from *Kitāb Ahbār Makka* from al-Azraqī. He then devotes about 40 pages and a map to Medina, as well as a brief history translated from Samhūdī (d. 911/1533).

In the middle of the 19th century, Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), who stayed for six weeks in Medina in July-August 1853, delivered in 1855 a first detailed and historical description of the city, devoting a chapter to the description of the mosque and the tomb of the Prophet, a second centred on the monumental history of the mosque («An Essay towards the History of the Prophet's Mosque») and finally one on Medina itself (Burton, 1893, I. 304-342, 343-375, 376-397). The author has written his work as an exhaustive study of the Apostolic City. It should be noted that for the historical overviews the author relies as much on the oriental studies of his time as on the Arab sources he knows. Thus, having been unable to see the tomb of the Prophet, he describes it from Ibn Jubayr. As for the hundred or so pages (ibid, II, 159-259 & 294-326) that he devotes to the pilgrimage to Mecca, he describes there essentially the rites and places where it is practised without going into the topographical history of the sanctuary. Richard Burton gives an ethnographic overview. Only in the appendix, he takes up the long description given by Burckardt.

Alongside this contemporary knowledge of the city, a more historical knowledge of the city is also developing through the publication of Arab geographers. Thus,

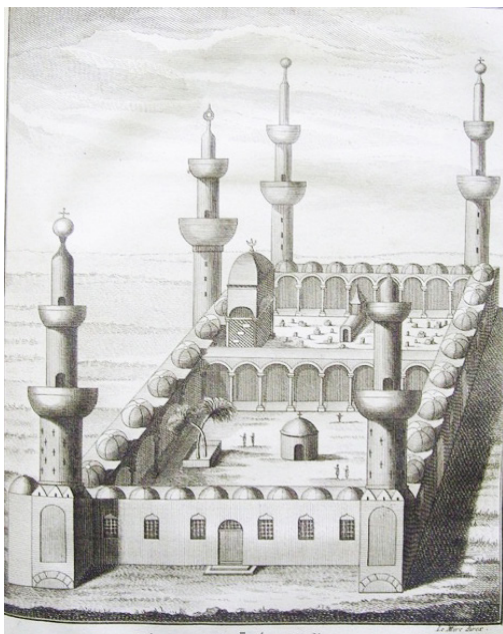


Fig. 3. View of Medina according Carsten Niebürh. Source: Niebürh, 1779.



Fig. 4. Tombs of the Prophet, Muhammad al-Gazūlī, Dalā'il al-khayrāt. Source: BMVR of Marseilles, Rare and Precious Fonds Ms. 1634, f. 54r.

Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Wüstenfeld, 1873) devoted in 1873 an in-depth study to the physical and tribal geography of Medina based on the works of al-Bakrī, Yāqūt and Samhūdī.

Other Arabic descriptions of the topography of the two holy cities are published, such as the description of Ibn Rusteh (Ibn Rusteh, 1872, 24-78) or the testimony of Ibn Jubayr (Ibn Jubayr, 1907).

Finally, from 1880 onwards, the first photographs of the holy cities appear (El-Hage, 2005). The first pictures are due to an Egyptian engineer, Muhammad Sadic Bey (1822-1902) who photographed the Ka'ba in 1880.

A few years later, the Dutchman Christian Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936) made the pilgrimage and settled for several months in Mecca where he met an Arab photographer 'Abd al-Ghaffar who gave him photographs and he also received one from Muhammad Sadic Bey. After returning to Europe, Snouck Hurgronje published his *Bilderatlas zu Mekka* in 1888, which was the first photographic album entirely devoted to Mecca.

The publication of Arab chroniclers, historians, geographers and travellers thus gradually enabled the 20th century to gain a better understanding of the topographical history of the two cities.

In the absence of archaeological excavations, historians resort to the comparison of ancient sources -graphic and literary- and modern testimonies but prior to the modernization of the 20th century to apprehend the topographical history of two sanctuaries. Four examples are given. In 1923, the French Arabist Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes (1862-1954) published an exhaustive study on pilgrimage, in the first part of which he gives a detailed description of the Ka'ba and its ancient and medieval history (Gaudefroy-Demombynes, 1923, 27-154). In addition to the

ceremonies, it describes the other aedicules (*qubba* of Zemzem, *qubba* of Ibn 'Abbās, the *maqām* Ibrāhīm, the *hijr*, the gate of Banī Shayba, ...) and finally the history of masgid al-ḥaram, the construction of its galleries, its gates and its minarets. In order to carry out this study, the author has essentially relied on ancient Arab testimonies, sometimes confronted with traditions that were still being conveyed in the 19th century.

For the Ka'ba in particular, several ancient 'plans' have been preserved in medieval manuscripts, and their study may provide elements on the history of the sanctuary. For example, the Iranian jurist Ibn al-Qass (4th/10th), a native of Amul, wrote a treatise on the clues to be used to find the qibla. In it he describes the Ka'ba, whose plan (Ducène, 2003) (Fig. 5) is preserved in an 18th century London manuscript (London, British Library, Add. 13315).

For Medina, the existence of an ancient plan of the mosque, preserved in Paris (*Bibliothèque nationale*, Ms ar. 6565) in a manuscript dated between 729/1329 and 826/1423, enabled the French archaeologist Jean Sauvaget to propose a fine historical study of the construction of the building (Sauvaget, 1947, 34-35& pl. II.).

Finally, recently Harry Munt devoted a study to the emergence of the sacred space of the city of Medina (Munt 2014).

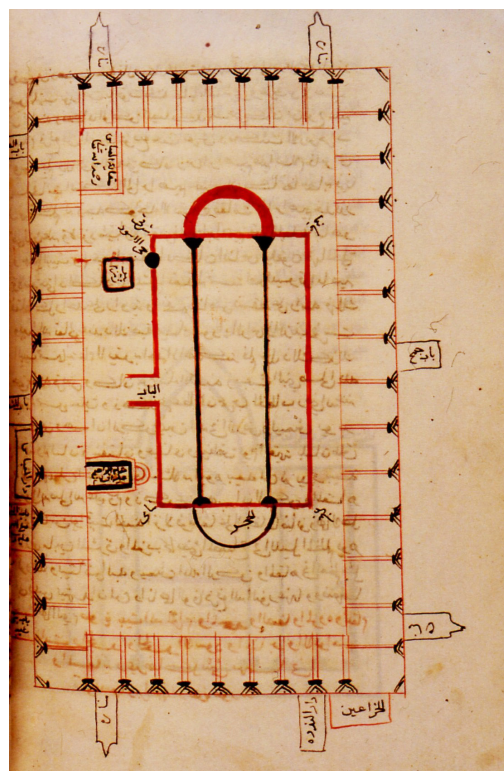


Fig. 5. Plan of the Ka'ba according to Ibn al-Qass. Source: London, British Library, Add. 13315.

## Conclusion

This chronological overview sufficiently shows that the cities of Mecca and Medina, by their religious importance, have excited the scientific curiosity of orientalist, regardless of the difficulty of access to them. In fact, there are few ancient testimonies of Europeans who have passed through these cities, but they all show a willingness to describe the sanctuaries objectively. As for the representations, it is first of all

“Muslim” images that serve as a model. In the 19th century, things got carried away with direct access to Arab sources which allowed a scholarly approach to the history of the two towns, combined with a better knowledge of the terrain thanks to real topographical reconnaissance and the appearance of the first plans of the two localities. However, the historiography remains marked by a focus on the sanctuaries and only incidentally addresses the urban development of the two cities in their geographical and human specificity.

## Endnotes

\*This article was presented at the conference “Islam and the city, various readings of a concept” which was held in February 2020 at the Science and Culture University, Tehran, Iran. This version of the article is provided exclusively for publication in *MANZAR Journal*.

1. An error has crept into the representation of Medina. The inner courtyard appears to be divided, as if a gallery parallel to the front wall divided it at the level of the tomb of the Prophet. The second small courtyard thus defined is clearly depicted in the open air. This is the prayer hall, which is perfectly covered by a roof.

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### HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Ducène, J.Ch. (2020). Medina and Mecca among the Orientalists (16th-19th century). *MANZAR*, 12(52), 58-63.

DOI: 10.22034/manzar.2020.113351

URL: [http://www.manzar-sj.com/article\\_113351\\_en.htm](http://www.manzar-sj.com/article_113351_en.htm)

