Religious Change vs Cultural Change

The Case of Islamisation in the Early Medieval Period

Jose Carvajal Lopez

Introduction

The concepts of religion and culture belong to that sphere of social knowledge where definitions are imprecise by necessity and where boundaries between different elements are blurred. No one is surprised to see concepts like Christianity or Islam used at the same time as religious and cultural markers, with more emphasis on one or the other meaning depending on the particular circumstances of the mention. However, that does not mean that we should not try to keep an awareness of the differences between religion and culture, because they are certainly different spheres of life. In other words, while a certain overlap between the two concepts is understandable (and necessary, as I explain below), the lack of a critical approach to try to keep them separate may produce major misinterpretations or underplay of historical and archaeological evidence. This does not mean, however, that we should not consider religion as a part of culture; rather the opposite: I argue that once the concept of religion is analysed in relation to material culture, its connections to other aspects of culture and society become evident. In this chapter I offer an example of how this conceptual separation contributes to refining our interpretation of the process of Islamisation in the early Islamic period (that is, during the first expansion of Islam (*c.* AD 622-1000), which roughly is contemporaneous to the early medieval period in Europe). I look at some examples of the transformation and creation of sacred spaces by Muslims in the Near East and in Iberia, highlighting the common and specific intricacies of each one of them, to finally extract some conclusions. My aim is to question the idea of Islamisation as a process that can be described only as a religious change and to suggest instead that the only way in which we can really understand it is considering a more transcendental cultural transformation in which changes in religious beliefs need to be tied to historical changes that encompass the material world and the ways in which people engage with it. The

in: Bielmann, C. and Thomas, B. (eds.) 2018: *Debating Religious Space and Place in the Early Medieval World (c. AD 300-1000)*, Sidestone Press (Leiden), pp. 111-126.

111

case that I will make in this chapter is that of the construction of sacred spaces and people's entanglement with them in daily life.

An interesting example of this would be one of the *muṣallā*/s in the north-western desert of Qatar (Fig. 24). A *muṣallā* is a small space for prayer, similar to a mosque, but much smaller in size. The structure is basically a *qibla* (that is, a wall facing Mecca) and a *miḥrāb*, a small apse in the centre of the wall. The structure in the picture has no archaeological context and it is not properly dated, but it very likely belonged to the tribe of Al-Naʿīm of Qatar, the most recent owners of this territory. The Meleiha well is one of the water reservoirs around which the Al- Naʿīm used to establish their summer camps and it is still nowadays in the heart of their tribal lands. The well itself may have been older, as well as the *muṣallā*. However, this example is not unique in Qatar nor in the deserts of the Middle East (King 1980, 268-270, for pre-Islamic and Islamic *muṣallā*/s in the Arabian Peninsula and Avni 1994 for early Islamic examples in the Negev desert). It has been suggested that these structures may have pre-Islamic roots (Johns 1999, 83-85). The interesting point that I want to make with this *muṣallā*, however, is to show how different the conception of sacred space is for a Bedouin in the desert in comparison with the perception of sacred space of Muslims of the towns. In the desert, a simple row of stones or even a line in the sand can be used to delimitate a temporary sacred space; in a town, this space needs to be permanent and clearly marked with architectonical elements. There is not a doctrinal difference in between the two types of spaces. Also, the differences described above are not necessarily more important than a number of common elements that will be discussed below. However, they are enough to make Muslims from the city to wonder at the way in which Bedoin *muṣallā*s work. For example, when I showed the *muṣallā* to one of my Egyptian students, she found it hard to believe that she was in front of a sacred space. This is due

Figure 24: An example of muṣallā found in Qatar (Image: Crowded Desert Project).

DEBATING RELIGIOUS SPACE AND PLACE IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL WORLD (C. AD 300-1000)

to the fact that even within the same religion, even when the same ritual is followed, cultural differences are evident.

The Transformation of the pre-Islamic into the Islamic World

The foundation of Islam in Arabia and its subsequent expansion through Eurasia and Africa brought about many changes. The nature of these changes and their speed is archaeologically more or less well known in some areas (*e.g.* Whitcomb 1995; Boone 2007; Walmsley 2007; Avni 2014 for Levant; Glick 1995; García Moreno 2011 for al-Andalus; Kennet 2004; 2005; 2007; 2012; Priestman 2013 for the Persian Gulf; Power 2012 for the Red Sea; Elzein 2004; Fenwick 2013; Horton and Middleton 2000 and Insoll 2003 for reviews of evidence in Sudan, North Africa, the Swahili Coast and Subsaharan Africa respectively), but due to lack of information is still a matter of discussion in most territories (*e.g.* most of North Africa, including Egypt, and Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, and much of Subsaharan and East Africa). However, change in itself has not been explained so well, probably because a single narrative is considered. In this narrative, change is triggered by the arrival of a foreign army that conquers the territory and puts it under the control of a distant, Islamic policy (the Caliphate or any of its surrogate states). This is a narrative that has not been made explicit outside of the academic and non-academic circles of those who hold the extreme position that Islam expanded only because it was imposed by the sword, a point of view which is untenable in the light of the evidence that we have available nowadays. However, the narrative of transformation as a direct consequence of conquest has not yet been criticised, and as such it is still taken for granted (a good example is the way in which Bulliet 1979 considers the way in which Islamic conversion and politics intermingle). While this narrative apparently works in most of the studied cases, those where the Muslim armies conquered a land before its Islamisation (and which are usually narrated with more or less detail in the written sources), it would be difficult to explain how the process worked in areas that were not conquered, as in large areas of Subsaharan Africa (*cf.* the Gao region in Mali as studied by Insoll 1996; 2000; for Tadmakka, also in Mali, see Nixon 2009; for the area of current Sudan, see Elzein 2004), the East African Coast (*cf.* Horton and Middleton 2000) and South Asia (*e.g.* see Eaton 1993 for the Islamisation of the Indian Subcontinent, and of Bangladesh in particular or Geertz 1971 for Indonesia). We still lack comprehensive approximations to the Islamisation in Central Asia and in wide territories in China and around the Indian Ocean. Even in the case of the areas that were conquered and brought under the control of an Islamic polity, the question remains on how the change occurred. Archaeological studies tend to focus on the intervention of the state as the main promoter of the religion by way of building infrastructures, like mosques, madrasas, and so on (Milwright 2010, 125-131), and look at the change in burial rituals as a way to calibrate the process of Islamisation (Milwright 2010, 131-135). Historical studies based on sources can also pinpoint at the role of pious individuals in fostering the religion with their living example, their peregrination, *etc.* (*e.g.* Fierro and Marín 1998 for the case of al-Andalus). These types of studies are very valuable, but in focusing on state intervention or on religious developments they offer a very partial vision of the cultural and social change that marks the separation between pre-Islamic and Islamic societies. An unchallenged focus on state

intervention in the promotion and protection of the religion leaves aside many relevant (probably the most relevant) agents of change, by downplaying their own motivations which are tied to ongoing social dynamics in a way that the state – dominated by its own internal logics – is not. Equally, focus on belief and ritual changes brings the risk of isolating the field of religion from the wider social process (*cf.* Insoll 2004). In my opinion, a study of Islamisation needs to be tied down to very particular historical and geographical circumstances in order to be understood from the point of view of the individuals affected by it (*cf.* Horton 1991; Eaton 1993; Insoll 1996; 2000; Carvajal López 2008; 2009; 2013; Carvajal López and Day 2013; 2015; Carvajal López, Hein *et al.* 2017; Molera *et al.* 2017). This allows to consider the 'Umma paradox' (Marranci 2008, 103-114), that is, the diversity within the unity of Islam (see also Insoll 1999, 9-11), as the result of the historical process of the expansion and definition of Islam itself during its first centuries of existence, and not as a simple matter of allowance and flexibility of Islamic traditions (although they are related to it, of course). The above mentioned historical complexity of Islam from its beginning has to be taken into account when reflecting about the creation of sacred spaces: not only are there several perspectives taken by scholars, but there are also several plausible possibilities within a variety of Islamic traditions and we should consider them separately.

Creation of Sacred Spaces: Perspectives of Change

When the first Muslims were creating their sacred spaces, they were inspired by the traditions inherited from their (mostly) Arab background, but they also had at their reach the local example, experience and possibilities developed in the areas that they had conquered, including the traditions of the Byzantine and Sassanian empires. These different backgrounds include spaces, architectural elements and configurations, decorative elements that enhance aspects of ritual, *etc*. They include the particular relations of these spaces with the surrounding, non-religious contexts as well, as we will see below. The way in which all these elements intermingled has been a matter of interest for scholars, who have proposed different ideas to explain this. In my opinion, these ideas can be summarized in four different points of view which underline different aspect of the process, yet are not mutually exclusive:

1. Adoption: It consist in taking an element of a different tradition with little or no changes at all. It is the case, for example, of the seizing of sacred spaces that had previously been used for other beliefs in conquered towns in Levant or in al-Andalus (*cf.* Guidetti 2014).

2. Adaptation: It is a similar process as the one described above, but the taken element undergoes some substantial changes in order to be admissible to the Islamic tradition. This is a fundamental process in the creation of Islamic art as Oleg Grabar saw it (Grabar 1973).

3. Resilience: While adoption and adaptation are parallel processes, resilience is their reverse, because it explains the resistance of the Muslims to drop their original Arab background. Resilience of Arab traditions is a quite evident feature of the devel-

opment of early Islam if one looks for it. It is quite visible, for example, in some examples of urbanism like in Fusṭāṭ (Akbar 1989; Whitcomb 2012) or in the shape of the first mosques (Johns 1999). In spite of that, scholars have tended to overlook it, focusing more on the processes of adoption and adaptation.

4. Change of structuring principles as a result of production and reproduction of practices: Although it is a much more complex elaboration than any of the processes outlined above, I would like to present this alternative as one in which all of the above-mentioned ideas are included and, what is more, can only be understood in relation to the others. This idea is a development of the ideas of Bourdieu (1977; 1990) and Giddens (1984) applied directly to the question here. More development of this proposal is offered below.

Adoption and Adaptation

The jump of the Muslim Arabs from a group of desert tribes to the elite of a world empire was possible, or at least facilitated, by the assimilation of the traditions and expertise found in the Byzantine and Sassanian empires. Therefore, the emphasis that scholarship has laid upon the processes of adoption and adaptation, particularly in the fields where state power and its cosmological representation are important, is somehow justified. This emphasis is evident in the processes of interpretation of cultural elements related to the creation of sacred spaces as well, in particular when these sacred spaces are important scenarios for the representation of power.

A clear example of a case of adoption and adaptation would be the construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem by the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Mālik ibn Marwān (*r.* AD 685-705) in AD 691 (Fig 25). The building erected in the Temple Mound (or the *Ḥaram al-Sharīf*, the Noble Sanctuary) has been interpreted as an attempt to claim (and therefore to adopt) the whole of the sacred space and to make a clear statement about the superiority of Islam over the other two monotheistic religions. The layout of the building, the decoration techniques and the use of Arabic as an imperial language in the inscriptions, all elements clearly modelled after Byzantine traditions, show clearly adoption and adaptation of former traditions in support of an imperial idea of Islam

Figure 25: The Dome of the Rock in the Ḥaram al-Sharīf (Image: Meunierd/Shutterstock).

(Grabar 1973; Elad 1992; Johns 2003). It is important to take into account that ʿAbd al-Mālik was the same caliph that carried out the monetary reform that created the gold-silver and copper pattern that was going to last for centuries (Johns 2003) and the same one that put an end to the second *fitna* (the internal strife for power that opposed the Marwānids, the second branch of the Umayyads, with other rival candidates to the caliphate; *cf.* Kennedy 1986, 82-122; Cobb 2010). He was certainly the paradigm of an imperial caliph (Johns 2003; but *cf.* Hoyland 2006 for a nuanced, yet not altogether different view on the role of this ruler).

However, there are also traditions that suggest that the Dome of the Rock was built in order to give a building to the Muslims that were already praying in the area, along with members of other religions. The object of their adoration was the *Ṣakhra*, the foundation stone of the Dome, which is also the rock from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended to heaven with the Archangel Gabriel and where he stood to pray with Abraham, Moses and Jesus (Elad 1992). Whether the account of the adoration by Muslims before the erection of the building is true or not (and as we will see below, there is no reason to consider it false), the fact is that it was used to justify the creation of the Dome and the claiming of the *Ḥaram al-Sharīf* for Islam. This is therefore an interesting case of a relationship with the past of an event – the erection of the Dome of the Rock – for which both a break pattern – the consolidation of a new policy – and a continuity pattern – the fostering of an ongoing tradition – can be argued.

The Dome of the Rock and the *Ḥaram al-Sharīf* are quite exceptional, but not the unique example of this pattern of adoption and adaptation. It is well known that early Muslims used to take over sacred spaces of other religions. Mosques were built in the spaces that had been previously occupied by churches in cities all over the Mediterranean, from Damascus to Cordoba (*cf.* Guidetti 2014), and the same phenomenon occurred in the more eastern lands that Muslims conquered, in temples of other religions. A recent work by Guidetti (2014) has shed some light on the narrative of the reuse of the sacred space of cathedrals for congregational mosques in several Syrian cities: Damascus, Hims, Aleppo, Diyarbakir, Urfa, and Amman where churches were in use, mosques do not seem to have been initially built to substitute the pre-existing temples, but to co-exist in parallel with them, or, sometimes, even inside them. To be sure, Muslims claimed only parts of the sacred grounds and built their mosques respecting the churches. It is only several decades, or even centuries, after the conquest that things changed: mosques were then rebuilt as more central buildings and the sacred spaces dedicated to other religious communities were not always respected (see Table 2 for the different chronologies of this process in the different cities). Guidetti suggests that the change of attitudes may have been caused by the loss of power of negotiations of the religious communities in front of the Muslims authorities. These communities had worked as intermediaries between the people of the cities and the Muslims in the time of the conquest, but after a period of time they would no longer be in a position to protect any privileges. As a possible second reason, Guidetti admits that there might have been relevant changes in the perception that Muslims had of themselves between the period of the conquests of Syria, which roughly covers the 630s, and the period in which different dynasties, starting with the Umayyads at the beginning of the eighth century, consolidated a vision of Islam as a religion intimately linked to state power.

Town	Date of Islamic conquest	Date of building of congregational mosque
Damascus	635	705
Ḥimṣ	636	12th century
Aleppo	637	715
Diyarbakir	639	After 11th century
Urfa	637	825
Amman	636	Mosque and cathedral coexisted during the whole early Islamic period

Table 2: Dates of conquest of Syrian towns and the date of building of their mosques (according to Guidetti 2014).

This chronology of erection of the Umayyad congregational mosques, for example in Damascus and in Aleppo, certainly fits well with the idea developed around the Dome of the Rock and the policies of ʿAbd al-Mālik (whose son and successor al-Walīd I [*r.* AD 705-715] was the patron of these mosques). These mosques were conceived as a manifestation of the growing power of the state. At the same time, they were not built on the bases of the rights of the conquerors over the vanquished, since that could have only happened when the generation of the conquerors was still in power. Rather, the state took over the sacred space and sought legitimation of this fact by linking it with the past of the sites. One way of doing this was claiming the relevance of the site for Muslims (as it occurred in the *Ḥaram al-Sharīf*). Another one was purchasing the land to the rightful owners (as in the relevant case of Damascus). Of course, there is very little here that tells us how the different religious communities of the time, including the Muslims, reacted towards these policies. This double pattern of break and continuity in relation to the past is telling more about politics than about society.

Sacred Spaces and the Resilience of Arab Traditions

This contribution has focused so far on sites that were relevant for a pre-Islamic religious community and that were transformed after the Muslim conquest. However, there are also mosques founded *ex novo* from the Muslims. One of the most notable of them is in Kūfā (Iraq), which constitutes one the earliest foundation of a mosque. It was founded on the command of the second of the four *Rāshidūn* Caliphs, ʿUmar ibn al-Khattāb (*r.* AD 634-644), in AD 637, only five years after the death of the Prophet. The building, studied by Creswell (1969, 48-58), already shows most elements of the basic structure of a mosque: a walled square layout divided in between a hypostyle roofed space (the praying hall, or *muṣallā or ẓulla*) and an open courtyard (*ṣaḥn*), the whole complex orientated towards Mecca; the only significant exceptions in this pattern are the absences of the *miḥrāb* in the *qibla* wall and of the portico (*riwāq*) lining up the courtyard. Almost every single mosque built from this period onwards shows those same basic elements. The tradition establishes that this basic design is inspired in the house of the Prophet in Madina, which contained some structural elements (courtyard, house and roofed area in the courtyard) that later on would become the different key parts of the hypostyle mosque (*ṣaḥn*, *muṣallā* and *riwāq* respectively) (Creswell 1969, 48-58; Johns 1999). Johns (1999) has criticised these traditions and the interpretations that take them for granted and has instead argued that the first mosques seem to have

been a purposeful creation of the period. Their design would include the basic design of temples of the long-standing pre-Islamic tradition (what Johns calls the hypaethral mosques, or open-air spaces for pray), influences from other models of temples taken from religions in the Middle East and some elements of the Mosque of the Prophet, which would have already filtered many of the pre-Islamic traditions and made them acceptable for the Islamic faith. The key point to bear in mind is that the mosque was a model created on purpose to highlight a new ritual and a new religion. Johns suggests that the figure of 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb could be the actual mind behind the creation of the successful model of mosque, because of the dates, the information provided by the written sources and the well-known policy of this caliph of building mosques (Johns 1999, 109-110). Whether Johns' theory is right or not, it is unquestionable that the design of mosque as a sacred space is quite different from the models of temples found in the area at the time of the expansion of Islam (churches, synagogues, fire temples, *etc.*) and that they must be considered intimately linked to Arab traditions or developments from those traditions. A very attractive point of Johns' suggestion is precisely the link that he is able to establish between the pre-Islamic traditions and the modest Bedouin structures, which are widely attested archaeologically, as we have seen above.

I must be very clear when linking the hypaethral mosques of Johns (which include the examples of the Negev collected in Avni 1994 and those of Western Arabia reported by King 1980, 268-270) with the presentation of the Bedouin structures documented in Qatar. They are all clearly coming from the same tradition of pre-Islamic open-air temples, but the way I use them in my argument is quite different to the way in which Johns does it in his. He emphasizes that his proposal of establishing a line of influence between the hypaethral temples and the model of mosque established in the early Islamic period is yet to be shown, since there are no archaeological data that can
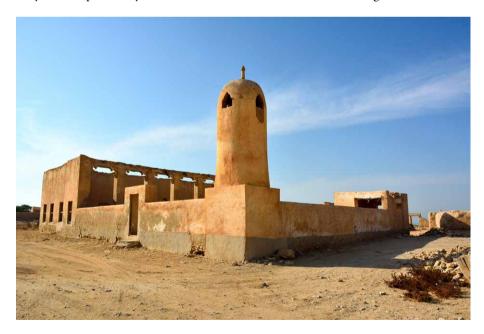

Figure 26: Mosque in abandoned village of al-Jumail, Qatar (19ᵗʰ-20ᵗʰ centuries) (Image: Alizada/Shutterstock).

be used to link both of them directly. From my perspective this is a minor question, because I am interested in the use of the hypaethral structures as Muslim sacred spaces, independently of their relationship to a model of worship and ritual established by the state. My point here is that one of the resilient elements of the Arab tradition is the legitimacy of any Muslim to establish a sacred space without the concourse of any established state or religious authority. If the early Islamic political power was successful in creating a model of mosque, it was never able to monopolize the creation of sacred space itself. In contrast to religions like Christianity, the temples of Islam are not places to connect directly with the Heavens, but with an ancestral place on the Earth: Mecca. Therefore, any space is potentially sacred as long as it allows a Muslim to find the right direction to this focal point. Since the structure of the religion of Islam lacks a formal hierarchy, there is no power that can claim the sole authority to build mosques and any believer can create their own place to pray (Fig. 26). This only means that there is not a doctrinal need for a believer to pray and follow the rituals in a particular place, but of course other factors, like social pressure or manifestations of political allegiance, may be decisive in this sense. The consequences of this will be discussed below.

The Problems of Adoption, Adaptation and Resilience as Considered Separately

The concepts of adoption, adaptation and resilience can be very informative in relation to particular issues considered in isolation, but when applied to a complex question like the creation of sacred spaces in early Islam they are confusing. The reason for this confusion is related on the one hand to the complementarity of the concepts, which are related to one another (as noted above). On the other hand, and in relation to the first reason, the separate use of the concepts forces us to think in terms of continuity or break between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic period, because the timeframe for the adoption, adaptation or resistance of any element requires to consider a moment before and a moment after the process under consideration, and the differences in between those moments. However, considering all the processes together in the same social dynamics allows us to escape a confusing and unproductive dichotomy between continuity and change.

In the particular case of Islamisation, the dichotomy between continuity and break that this way of thinking produces leads to consider the expansion of Islam as a religious change rather than as a more complex cultural change. From a strictly theological point of view, change cannot be gradual, contradictory and problematized: it is a matter of accepting dogmata. This is of course not necessarily the view of the people involved in the change (which is rather more complicated), but it is the change that we are assuming to have happened from the exclusive perspective of religion. There are two main problems with this perspective. The first one is that it forces us to consider the existence of longer or shorter transitions, that is, periods of time when we have to acknowledge that the change is still incomplete. In those periods of time we can only guess what is going on aided by the more or less scarce data that we may have and what our own idea about the change itself is. This occurs, for example, in the crucial decades that go from the conquest of the Syrian cities and the building of the Umayyad congregational mosques. The second problem is derived from the first one: in the absence of questions about the process that it is driving change, we tend to consider change itself

as self-explanatory. This is why the process of Islamisation is so scarcely understood from the point of view of social change: it is usually conceived that everything changed with the arrival of Muslims and with their establishment of a state. But in missing the complexities of this process, we are unable to understand the role that different people, different communities, played in it.

A Proposal to Consider Sacred Space from the Perspective of Practice

Is there another possible approach? Rather than using separately the concepts of adoption, adaptation and resilience and thus to be trapped by the dichotomy of continuity and break to explain the phenomena described before, my suggestion is to plan the study of sacred spaces from the perspective of an integral approach to the material space by looking for the ways in which a harmonious combination of the three concepts and the physical evidence points to socially and historically consistent scenarios. In other words, we should change our focus of study from the physical to the social and historically contingent space. The physical space is simply a location, but the social space is a construction made on the basis of very particular references of the group of people that engage historically with the location and with everything that it contains. In making this shift, we no longer speak about the transformation of space, but rather about the social process of the creation of that space as sacred. From this point of view, the different cultural and social dimensions can be brought together in a common explanatory framework.

A good example of that type of approach to sacred space is that of the mosque area of Ilbīra, a town in the Iberian Peninsula, near Granada (South East Spain). Ilbīra is one of the earliest towns of the Muslims in Iberia, but its congregational mosque was not build until the year AD 864, in the context of an expansion of the Umayyad power from Cordoba. In particular, in the area of Ilbīra, this expansion of state power became contested, and conflict arose with different sectors of society which the sources identify respectively as Arabs, Renegades (non-Muslims, or apostates) and the *Ahl Ilbīra*, or the People of Ilbīra (presumably Muslims, and presumably non-Arabs). Arabs and Renegades would clash amongst themselves and in some cases also with the forces of the state, while the People of Ilbīra, directly threatened by the other parties, would look for an alliance sometimes with the Renegades and eventually with the Cordoban government. This period of revolt ended when the state put down the Renegades and managed to reach advantageous agreements with the Arabs and the People of Ilbīra (for more information on these groups and conflict, see Carvajal López 2008; 2013; Carvajal López, Román Punzón *et al.* 2014). According to the written sources, the mosque of Ilbīra was built in the place where an earlier temple had been erected by a certain Hanash ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Sanʿānī, a mythical character associated to the conquest of Iberia (Simonet 1982 [1896], 22-25 and Fig. 5; on the character of Hanash al-Sanʿānī, see Fierro 1988 and Fierro and Marín 1998). Thus, as the Damascene Umayyads claimed the relationship of Muhammad with the *Ṣakhra* in order to have the legitimacy to overtake the *Ḥaram al-Sharīf*, so the Cordoban Umayyads, presumably with the acquiescence of the People of Ilbīra and the Arabs, seemed to have use the figure of Ibn al-Sanʿānī when claiming the space to erect the congregational mosque. The mosque served as a space of representation of the power of the Umayyads, underlining
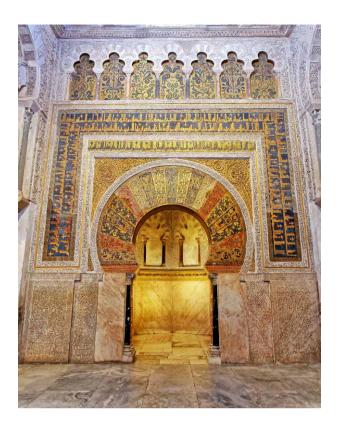
Figure 27: Miḥrāb of the Mosque of Cordoba, erected in 961 by order of the Caliph Al-Ḥakam II. The grandeur of the building and of this particular part were designed to link religion and the power of the Umayyad dynasty (Image: Toni Genes/Shutterstock).

the success of Cordoba in the region, and also perhaps as a material commemoration of the agreement between the Umayyad government, the Arabs and the People of Ilbīra.

The mosque of Ilbīra was found more than 100 years ago (Gómez Moreno 1986 [1898]), but its location has been lost again. The excavations that took place in 2007 in the area in search of the building have not been successful, but they have documented an Islamic cemetery that can be dated at around the same time than the foundation of the mosque. The tombs were dug in the soil and covered with tiles, but, interestingly, one of them stood out. It was clearly monumental, made in roughly shaped ashlar stones. However, its excavation showed that the tomb had been originally very similar to the rest that is, covered with tiles, and that at some point it was reopened and re-made with the ashlar stones (Malpica *et al.* 2008). The refurbishment of the tomb as a focal point clearly implied a transformation of the sacred space of the cemetery. The radiocarbon dates of the body and the dates of some pottery sherds around the tomb suggest that the transformation of the burial space is roughly contemporaneous to the process of the creation of the congregational mosque nearby. I have suggested, on the bases of this and other evidence of the period that what we are documenting is the establishment of a 'cultural standardisation' in the area of Granada by the Umayyad dynasty of Cordoba. In other words, the Umayyads set themselves as the legitimate driving force of the expansion of Islam by merging ritual and political aspects, and in this way they were successfully influencing the way in which Islam (and Islamic culture in general) should be manifested all over al-Andalus (Carvajal López 2013). Before the erection of the congregational mosque in Ilbīra and the refurbishment of the tomb, the

sacred space (whatever its physical form and elements were) would have been used for the representation of local powers, the powers of a Muslim society which had a different language to express their authority in terms of material culture. The construction of the mosque implied the takeover of this sacred space by the Umayyads from Cordoba, who would transform it into a space of representation of their own power, with their own language. As documented, this process consists in the creation of a sacred space not only as a representation of a religion, but, more importantly in social terms, as the issue of an statement of power in which religion and belief play a fundamental but well delimited role, as it still be seen in the Mosque of Cordoba nowadays (Fig. 27).

While the adoption and adaptation of spaces and historical elements is obvious in the choice of the place for the congregational mosque in Ilbīra, a factor of resilience of the Arab tradition must be considered in relation to this case: the legitimacy for any Muslim individual to create a sacred space beyond any constraints from state or religious authority. This capacity places a strong stress in the fabric of the political power itself. Sacred spaces can in fact become foci of concentration of symbolic capital, with the consequent emergence of alternative centres of power to those of the recognized authorities. For this reason, it is only logical that at some point the development of the early Islamic polity would require the creation of central sacred places that, beyond their function as spaces for pray, would be understood also as spaces for the representation of the political power of the state. In this perspective, sacred spaces were also spaces for contesting or reaffirming established political structures. In order to find more examples, we can return to the Dome of the Rock: it must not be forgotten that one of the alleged motives for its construction was 'Abd al-Mālik's plan to substitute the centrality of Mecca, at that time in the hands of a political anti-caliph, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (r. AD 680-692), for that one of Jerusalem (Elad 1992, but see Johns 2003, 425-426 for a criticism of this point). Although this is not a confirmed account, it shows how the location of the sacred spaces was conceived as a tension between religious symbolism and political power. The end of the coexistence of sacred spaces for different religions in the Syrian towns that Guidetti has documented (2014) can perhaps be related to similar processes of power representation.

Conclusion

In the introduction I argued for the necessity of keeping an awareness of the differences between religion and culture. The aim of this is not to establish a full separation of the two concepts (which is impossible), but to put them in a perspective that allows appreciation of their relationship and the effects of it in the case of Islamisation, or more precisely, in particular cases of creation of sacred space during the early Islamic period. These examples show that it is actually more productive to try to understand the creation of sacred space in the context of a historically contextualized culture than in that of its transformation from one religion to another. I have particularly focused on the use of sacred space as a scenario for the contest between alternative conceptions of power, but I believe that this discussion can and indeed needs to be taken to other grounds as well. Particularly, and always in my experience, changes in craft production and object consumption offer a very promising field for the nuanced understanding of cultural change with relevant religious implications.

As a final thought, I would like to revisit the concept of Islamisation considering all the above. If we understand Islamisation as the way in which Islam is transmitted in the form of a set not only of beliefs, but also of practices and structuring principles, then we cannot limit it to the process of conversion: it is a social and cultural process. In other words, Islamisation is a matter of cultural change and continuity, whether we are considering the inhabitants of an area recently brought under the influence of Islam or whether we are talking about the process of socialisation of individuals born and raised within an Islamic society. The point of my statement is not to underplay the obvious differences between the two situations, but rather to highlight the common ground which allows us to study both under the same paradigm. The advantages of this conception of Islamisation are very important. The aim of historical and archaeological research is now the particular and specific circumstances of cultural transmission of religious practices. This perspective allows room for many different conceptions of the transcendental content of a religion (as there are as many as believers), and therefore not only doctrinal and theological aspects of the religion should be considered when making interpretations of the available evidence. Religious practices are historically situated in a material world, and therefore they are affected by possibilities and constraints coming from different dimensions of life. Sacred spaces such as the ones presented in this chapter are material and social spaces, and therefore they play a role beyond religion. It will be interesting to explore in the future the religious implications of segments of material culture that current interpretations place outside the religious sphere. The reflections of Insoll (2004) about the connections religion with other spheres of life open a very exciting avenue of research.

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Akbar, J. 1989. Khatta and the Territorial Structure of Early Muslim Towns. *Muqarnas 6*, 23-32.

Avni, G. 1994. Early Mosques in the Negev Highlands: New Archaeological Evidence on Islamic Penetration of Southern Palestine. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 294, 83-100.

Avni, G. 2014. *The Byzantine-Islamic Transition in Palestine: An Archaeological Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boone, J. 2009. *Lost civilisation: the contested Islamic past in Spain and Portugal*. London: Duckworth.

Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bulliet, R. 1979. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: an essay in quantitative history*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Carvajal López, J.C. 2008. *La cerámica de Madinat Ilbīra y el poblamiento altomedieval de la Vega de Granada (siglos VIII-XI)*. Granada: THARG.

Carvajal López, J.C. 2009. Pottery production and Islam in south-east Spain: a social model. *Antiquity* 83/320, 388-398.

Carvajal López, J.C. 2013. Islamicisation or Islamicisations? Expansion of Islam and social practice in the Vega of Granada (south-east Spain). *World Archaeology* 45/1, 56-70.

Carvajal López, J.C. and Day, P.M. 2013. Cooking pots and Islamicisation in the early medieval Vega of Granada (Al-Andalus, sixth to twelfth centuries). *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 32/4, 433-451.

Carvajal López, J.C. and Day, P.M. 2015. The production and distribution of cooking pots in two towns of South East Spain in the 6th – 11th centuries. *Journal of Archaeological Science. Reports* 2, 282-290.

Carvajal López, J.C., Hein, A., Glascock, M.D. and Day, P.M. 2017. Combined petrographic and chemical analysis of water containers and glazed wares in the Early Medieval Vega of Granada (south east Spain, 6th to 12th centuries CE). *Journal of Archaeological Science. Reports (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2017.09.016)*.

Carvajal López, J.C., Román Punzón, J.M., Jiménez Puertas, M. and García García, M. *In press. The Islamisation of the Vega of Granada*. Brepols: Turnhout.

Cobb, P. 2010. The empire in Syria, 705-763, in: Robinson, C. (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam. Vol. 1: The Formation of the Islamic World. Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 226-268.

Creswell, K.A.C. 1969. *Early Muslim Architecture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eaton, R.M. 1993. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Elad, A. 1992. Why Did 'Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-Examination of the Muslim Sources, in: Raby, J. and Johns, J. (eds), *Bayt al-Maqdis. 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 33-58.

Fenwick, C. 2013. From Africa to Ifriqīya: Settlement and Society in Early Medieval North Africa (650-800). *Al-Masāq* 25/1, 9-33.

Fierro, M. 1988. The introduction of hadith in al-Andalus (2nd/8th-3rd/9th centuries). *Der Islam* 66, 68-93.

Fierro, M. and Marín, M. 1998. La Islamización de las ciudades andalusíes a través de sus ulemas (s. II/VIII-comienzos del siglo IV/X), in: Cressier, P. and García-Arenal, M. (eds), *Genèse de la ville islamique en al-Andalus et au Maghreb occidental*. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez-CSIC, 65-97.

García Moreno, L. (ed.) 2011. *711. Arqueología e Historia Entre Dos Mundos*. Madrid: Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid. Servicio de Documentación y Publicación.

Geertz, C. 1971. *Islam Observed. Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Giddens, A. 1984. *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

Glick, T.F. 1995. *From Muslim fortress to Christian castle: social and cultural change in Medieval Spain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Gómez Moreno, M. 1986 [1888]. *Medina Elvira*. Granada: Grupo de Autores Unidos.

Grabar, O. 1973. *The Formation of Islamic Art*. London: Yale University Press.

Guidetti, M. 2014. The contiguity between churches and mosques in early Islamic Bilād al-Shām. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 76/2, 229-258.

Horton, M. 1991. Primitive Islam and Architecture in East Africa. *Muqarnas* 8, 103-116.

Horton, M. and Middleton, J. 2000. *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society*. London: Blackwell.

Hoyland, R. 2006. New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State. *Bulletin of School for Oriental and African Studies* 69/3, 395-416.

Insoll, T. 1996. *Islam, Archaeology and History. Gao Region (Mali) c. AD 900-1250*. British Archaeological Report (International Series) 647. Oxford: Tempus Reparatum.

Insoll, T. 1999. *The Archaeology of Islam*. London: Blackwell.

Insoll, T. 2000. *Urbanism, Archaeology and Trade. Further Observations on the Gao Region (Mali). The 1996 Field Season Results*. British Archaeological Report (International Series) 829. Oxford: Tempus Reparatum.

Insoll, T. 2003. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Insoll, T. 2004. *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion*. London: Routledge.

Johns, J. 1999. The 'House of the Prophet' and the Concept of the Mosque, in: Johns, J. (ed.), *Bayt al-Maqdis: Jerusalem and Early Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 59-112.

Johns, J. 2003. Archaeology and the History of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years of Islam. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46/4, 411-436.

Kennedy, H. 1986. *The prophet and the age of Caliphates: the Islamic Near East from the sixth to the eleventh century*. London: Longman.

Kennet, D. 2004. *Sasanian and Islamic Pottery from Ra's al-Khaimah: classification, chronology and analysis of trade in the Western Indian Ocean.* British Archaeological Report (International Series) 1248. Oxford: Archaeopress.

Kennet, D. 2005. On the eve of Islam: archaeological evidence from Eastern Arabia. *Antiquity* 79/303, 107-118.

Kennet, D. 2007. The decline of Eastern Arabia in the Sasanian period. *Arab Archaeology and Epigraphy* 18/1, 86-122.

Kennet, D. 2012. Archaeological history of the Northern Emirates in the Islamic period: an outline, in: Potts, D. and Hellyer, P. (eds), *Fifty Years of Emirates Archaeology*. Abu Dhabi – Dubai – London: Motivate Publishing, 189-201.

King, G. 1980. Notes on Some Mosques in Eastern and Western Saudi Arabia. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43/2, 251-276.

Malpica Cuello, A., García Porras, A., Carvajal López, J.C., Mattei, L., Ruiz Jiménez, A., Narváez Sánchez, J.A., González Escudero, A., García-Contreras Ruiz, G. and Koffler Urbano, T. 2008. Informe de la II Campaña de Excavación Sistemática dentro del Proyecto «La ciudad de Madinat Ilbira». *http://www.medinaelvira.org/doc/completo07.pdf* (accessed: 23 Dec 2015).

Marranci, G. 2008. *The Anthropology of Islam*. Oxford-New York: Berg.

Molera, J., Carvajal López, J.C., Molina, G. and Pradell, T. 2017. Glazes, colorants and decorations in early Islamic glazed ceramics from la Vega de Granada (9th to 12th centuries AD). *Journal of Archaeological Science. Reports (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2017.05.017).*

Nixon, S. 2009. Excavating Essouk-Tadmakka (Mali): new archaeological investigations of early Islamic trans-Saharan trade. *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 44/2, 217-255.

Power, T. 2012. *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate: AD 500-1000.* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Priestman, S. 2013. *A Quantitative Archaeological Analysis of Ceramic Exchange in the Persian Gulf and Western Indian Ocean, AD c. 400 – 1275.* Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Southampton.

Simonet, F. J. 1982 [1896]. *Cuadros Históricos y Descriptivos de Granada. Coleccionados con motivo del cuarto centenario de su memorable conquista.* Madrid: Atlas.

Walmsley, A. 2007. *Early Islamic Syria: an archaeological assessment.* London: Duckworth.

Whitcomb, D. 1995. Islam and the socio-cultural transition of Palestine – early Islamic period (638-1099 CE), in: Levy, T.E. (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land.* London: Leicester University, 488-501.

Whitcomb, D. 2012. Formation of the Islamic city. A second archaeological period of urban transition, in: Matthews, R. and Curtis, J. (eds), *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (12-16 April the British Museum and UCL, London), Vol 2.* Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 619-631.