

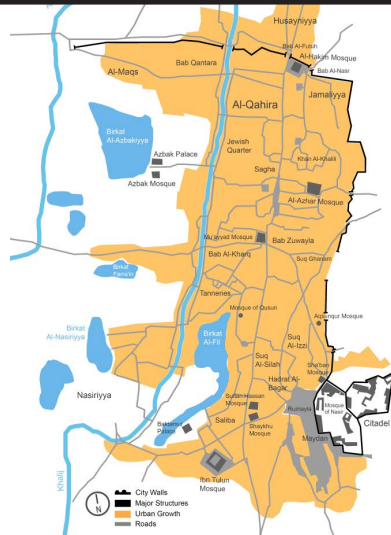
4.617

TOPICS IN ISLAMIC URBAN HISTORY

WHAT IS AN ISLAMIC CITY? THE CASE OF CAIRO

Instructors: Nasser Rabbat
Schedule: T 2-5
Room: 5-216
Units: 3-0-6, 3-0-9 G
TA: Eldante Winston
<eldante@mit.edu>

PERMISSION OF INSTRUCTOR NEEDED
OPEN TO ADVANCED UNDERGRADUATES



The Islamic City is a crucial yet contentious concept in the study of Islamic history. Coined during the colonial period, it has long been presented in terms of a distinct phenomenon related primarily to Islam as a faith with a set of fixed laws, customs, and common architectural types. Informed by a Weberian notion of the ideal-type, early Orientalists tried to validate their essentialist construct by looking for evidence in pre-modern cities in North Africa and Syria. Medieval Islamic historians and geographers, on the other hand, had evolved a formal and descriptive approach that recorded the changes they witnessed in the cities they studied, although they seldom attempted to explain or contextualize them. When they did, they offered historical, political, and ecological interpretations, and very rarely religious or idealist ones.

Disentangling the rhetoric that surrounds the study of the Islamic City requires a genealogical approach to urban history where layers of historical density form an intelligible cultural topography, while at the same time remaining analytically distinct. Our example will be Cairo, the quintessential Islamic city. Founded in 634 at the strategic head of the Nile Delta, the city evolved from the first Islamic settlement in Africa to the seat of the ambitious Isma'ili Fatimid caliphate, which flourished between the 10th and 12th century. Its most spectacular age, however, and the primary focus of this seminar, was the Mamluk period (1250-1517), when the city, with its myriad learning and religious centers, became the uncontested center of a resurgent Islamic identity and acquired an architectural and urban character that symbolized the image of Islamic architecture and urbanism for centuries to come.

Through the examination of texts and architectural/archaeological data, we will study the forms and social structures of medieval Cairo from its foundation to its Mamluk apogee. We will analyze how the various political systems that succeeded one another asserted themselves over the diverse cultural alignments and various urban traditions that have shaped the forms and structures of the city over time. We will probe how medieval Islamic scholars conceptualized, understood, and represented these cities both as urban and as political and legal entities.

With the help of this focused historical inquiry, we will critically review the literature on the Islamic City and evaluate its dual general abstraction: the structural, informed by the ideal-type notion, and the formal, informed by a circumscribed notion of archeology that was popular in the twentieth century. Finally, we will consider how a rather essentialist concept came to dominate the study of cities in Islamic history, how it is being deconstructed in recent critical studies, and whether it is still relevant today for the study of cities in Islamic history.

The course is open to qualified undergraduates. Readings other than the required texts will be posted on the Stellar Site. Students are required to present individually and/or in groups on the weekly readings (depending on enrollment) and to upload their presentations to the Stellar site afterward. Students are also required to develop a research paper (min. 20 pp. or 5000 words) to be decided upon with the instructor by the fourth week and presented twice in class: in the middle (in abstract form) and at the end of the term, and then submitted in the penultimate week of the semester.

Required Texts: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*; translated by F Rosenthal; abridged and edited by N.J. Dawood. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) Vols. 1 and 2. Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Nasser Rabbat, *Mamluk History Through Architecture: Building, Culture, and Politics in Mamluk Egypt and Syria*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).