

Eliana Martinelli
**Shared landscape, transposed landscape.
 Cemeterial settlements of the Islamic Mediterranean**

Abstract

The essay starts from theoretical observations on the general meaning of the cemetery as *other* city, considering the symbolic, morphological and settlement constants of ancient cemeteries in the Mediterranean Islamic world. The city of the dead is always related to the city of the living by analogies and juxtapositions, in line with Islamic cosmology. Both Istanbul's Ottoman graveyards, internal and external to the city, and the cemeterial settlements next to the gates of the ancient Fez, reveal this feature. The essay aims to point out some recurring compositional principles (the presence of a boundary, the relationship with the topography and the urban structure) and compare the different values to those of the European cemeteries. The goal is to identify practical tools for designing new landscapes of the dead

Keywords

City of the dead — Islamic Mediterranean — Urban morphology — Landscape — Cemeteries

The study of the morphological features of burial places cannot overlook the evolution of the rites and philosophical thought related to death.

Mainly in the city of the dead, a collective sense of belonging to humanity can be found. Mircea Eliade (1965) defines the *homo religiosus* as a mode of existence common to every civilisation and always recognisable. The religious man believes in the reality of the sacred and its spatial identification; therefore, he fragments the space based on hierophanies. The profane modern man results from a secularisation of existence; however, he descends from the religious man. Consequently, in contemporary times, some attitudes ascribable to an ancestral sacredness, which recovers in the symbols a possible openness to the universal, remain.

The city of the dead is an architectural translation of these symbols, which constitute the spiritual heritage of every civilisation. Traditionally, it has been built as an absolute image of the city of the living, reproducing its constructive principles, site- and time-specific. According to Michel Foucault (2006), the cemetery is a universal heterotopia¹, permanent in each society, and represents an *other* city, where every family owns its black home (Foucault 1994, p. 16). Until the 18th century, cemeteries were located in the city centre, next to the places of worship. They hosted the burials in mass graves, except for some prestigious tombs. In Europe, the building of real cities of the dead started from the second half of the 19th century. The aim was to comply with, on the one hand, the functional and hygienic needs established by the Napoleonic decree of 1804; on the other hand, the will to represent the new state and the middle-class power, *post mortem* too. Not by chance, the individual burials began to exist when society lost contact with the sacredness: when people are no longer sure of life after death, it becomes necessary to venerate the mortal remains.

Cemetery, as every heterotopia, is characterised by a boundary that emphasises the separation from the *other* space. This feature can also be found at the etymological level if we connect the physical place with the image of the afterlife, that is, paradise. The Latin term comes from the Greek *paràdeisos*, which, in turn, derives from the ancient Iranian (Avestan) *pairidaēza*, a word that, as the Persian *firdaws*, names the enclosure without any religious significance. A type of Islamic graveyard is the *rawdah*, the so-called garden-cemetery, whose root defines it as the site to “domesticate” nature. Therefore, in the different cultures, paradise is represented as an enclosed garden.

In the urban Christian cemetery, the thickness of the fence is often “inhabited” by the tombs overlapped in height, building up an actual boundary wall. The presence of doors, from which usually the paths branch off axially, makes the fence penetrability impressive. Chapels, ossuaries and crematories are sometimes separated from the boundary wall, becoming monuments that evidence the hierarchic space relations. Indeed, the cemetery is shaped like a foundation town.

On the contrary, in the Islamic world, the enclosure is thin, windowed and almost non-existent. The reason is that the Qur’an desacralized the cemetery, transforming it into a garden open to the world of the living. «The most beautiful tomb», the Prophet affirms, «is that disappearing from the Earth’s surface.» However, the human inclination to glorify the dead, particularly the saints, led to the building of great cemeterial complexes and mausoleums (Burckhardt 2002, p. 98), which, once realised, can no longer be deconsecrated. Therefore, the Muslim cemeteries are gradually embedded in the progressive urban expansion, leading to interpenetration between the city of the living and the city of the dead. This phenomenon morphologically expresses the doctrine of divine Unity (*Tawhid*), well represented by the city structure: Islam does not distinguish between the sacred and the profane, so everyday actions and religious ones are blended, as the places dedicated to them².

The burials related to the religious complexes are often considered for their value as monuments. On the other hand, the literature concerning the issue of the vast cemeterial settlements external to the ancient city does not exist from a compositional point of view. Often located on the hills in a panoramic position, they seem to reproduce nature and landscape informally. We can find relevant analogous compositional principles in the structure of the Islamic city³.

In the Ottoman city – here interpreted as an expression of Islamic one⁴ – cemeteries, like all the open spaces, have a solid morphological value, determining the urban features.

Since the 15th century, the cemeterial groups of the *külliyes*⁵ increased in number and opened the enclosure to urban life through windows, which allowed the view for short prayers (Cerasi 1988, p. 214). The *külliyes* were built around the mausoleums (*türbes*), devoted to representing the worship of saints. The *türbes*, often positioned in the higher points of the *külliyes*, constitute a unitary fragment (*tektunik*⁶) of the more complex domed space of the mosques: typologically, they consist of a cube or octagon covered by a cupola. The juxtaposition of these components dominates the urban skyline, in a constant dialogue between the mausoleums, expression of vertical axiality, and the mosques, whose horizontal axes connect parts of the city at great distances. All the elements are related to the voids of the *meydans*⁷. The *türbe* lays on the urban space conceived as infinite, defin-

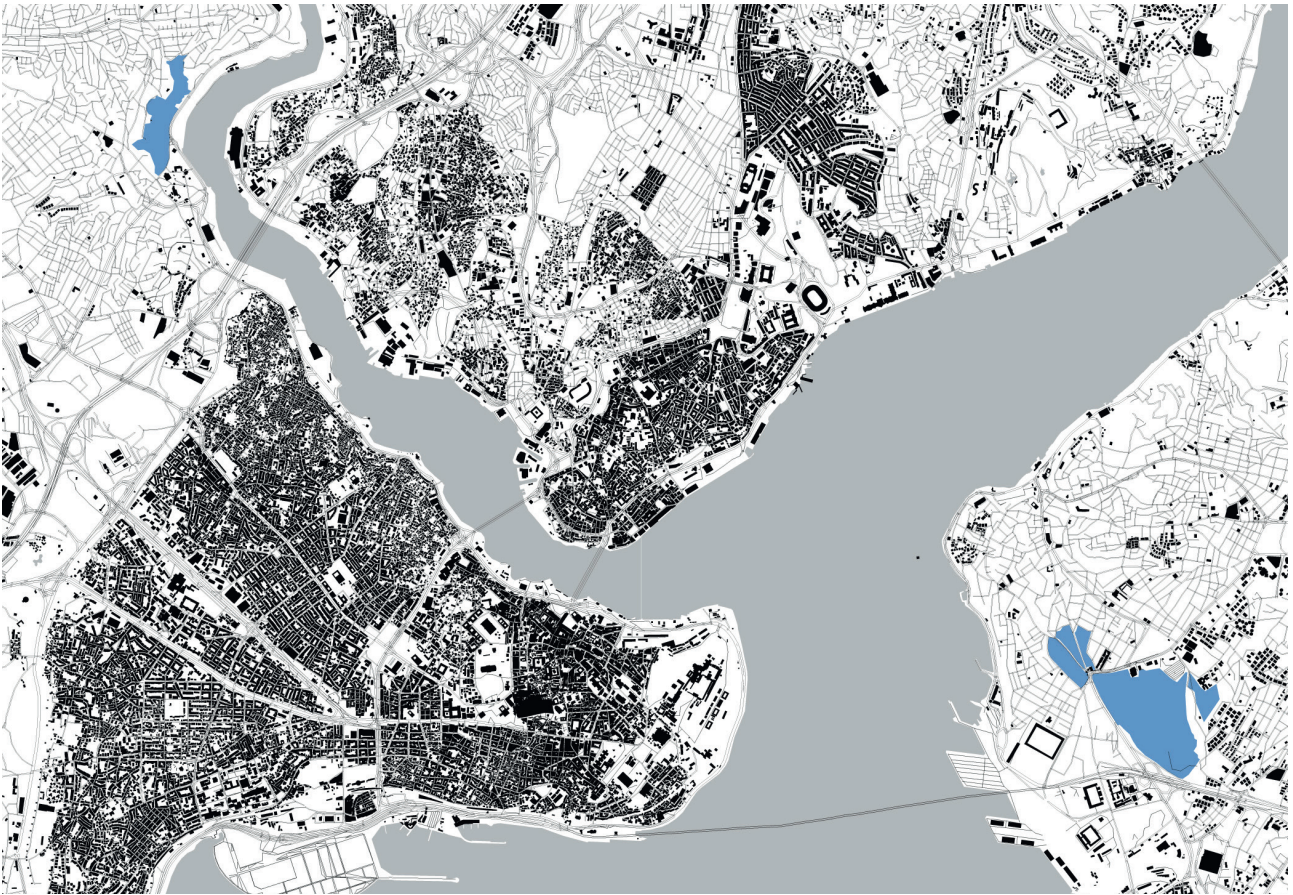


Fig. 1

Eliana Martinelli, The city of Istanbul in relationship to the cemeterial areas of Karacaahmet (eastward) and Eyüp (northward), 2021.

ing the place to accommodate a wooden tomb. According to James Dickie (1987, p. 76), the central space is comparable to an inner garden.

In addition to the cemeteries next to the mosques, we can find vast cemeterial parks outside the ancient city's perimeter. In these cases, the geometric definition of the boundary is not rigid: often, the limit consisted of a low wall retaining the soil, on which the tombs settle in visual contact with the rest of the city. The apparent informality of these spaces, basically used as urban parks, derives from a precise interpretation of the world: the Ottoman culture is aesthetically linked to contemplative fruition of nature and the uncontested acceptance of the pre-existing forms, both natural and urban. In Istanbul, the built model of the Ottoman city, dense groves of cypresses fill the graveyards, representing sacred woods; for this reason, Pietro Della Valle defines Istanbul as the «city of cypresses» (Petrucchioli 1994). In the composition of the Ottoman city, indeed, the trees constitute the counterpoint to the architecture⁸, achieving the same morphological value.

The more expansive Oriental cemetery, dated to the 14th century, with an extension of more than three hundred hectares, is that of Karacaahmet in Üsküdar, facing on the Bosphorus from the Asian side. Here the trees are alternated with the ancient burials, each one identified by a stone stem. This element is a transposition of the wooden stem fixed in the ground, which characterised the pre-Islamic Asian model. The tomb-canopies of the most well-off families refer to the Byzantine *fiâlas* (Cerasi 1988, p. 213). On the other side of Istanbul, in the European part, the Eyüp neighbourhood is an actual city of the dead included in the city of the living. The Eyüp Sultan Mosque, founded on the tomb of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, Companion of the Prophet, has made the entire district a holy city. His vast graveyard faces on the Golden Horn, outside the ancient Constantinople's walls.

Fig. 2

Thomas Allom, Karacaahmet Cemetery, engraving (from R. Walsh, Constantinople and the scenery of the seven churches of Asia Minor, Son Fisher, London 1839).

**Fig. 3**

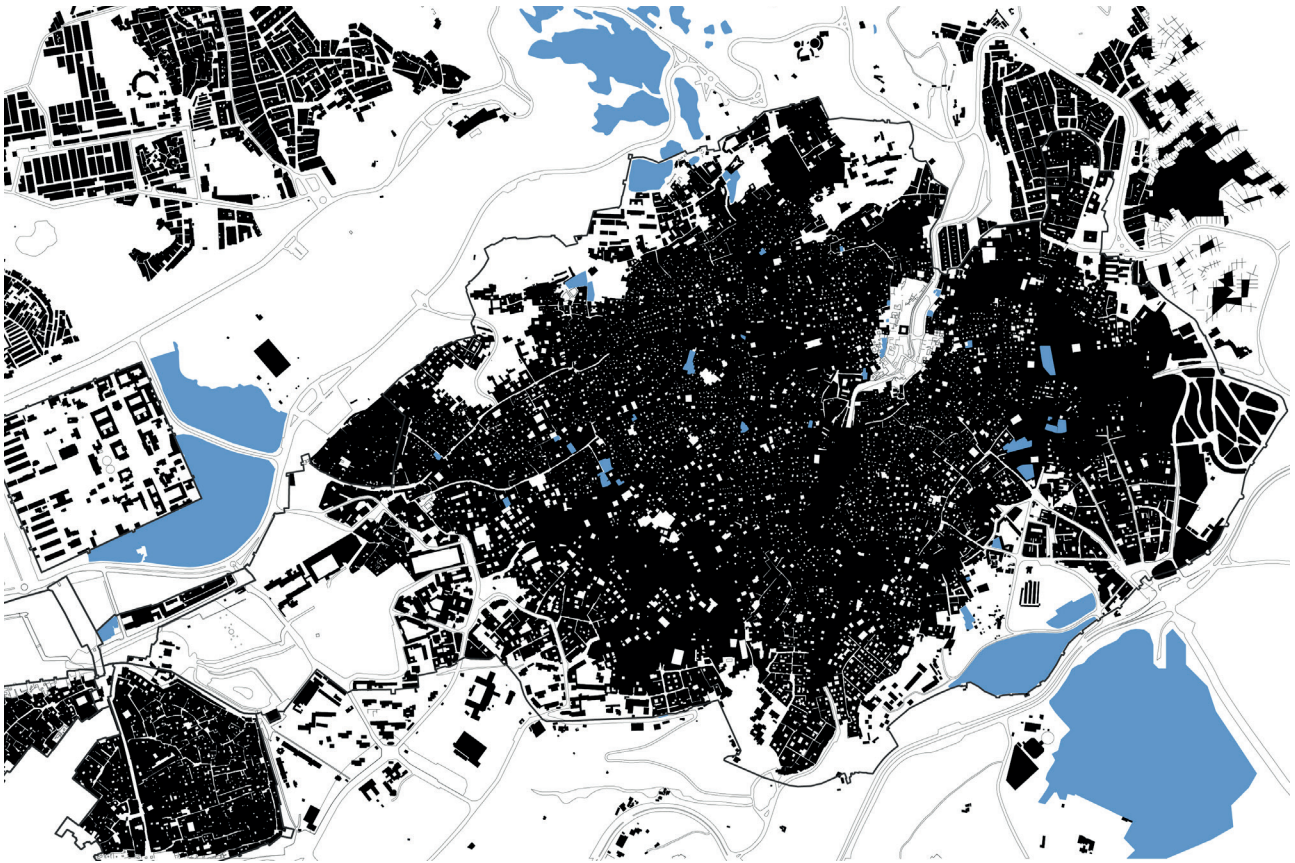
Mouradgea D'Ohsson, «Rites of passage in the Islamic cemetery of Eyüp», engraving (from *Tableau Général de l'Empire Othoman, divisé en deux parties, dont l'une comprend la Législation Mahométane; l'autre l'Histoire de l'Empire Othomane*, vol. I, De l'imprimerie de Monsieur, Paris 1787).



According to a construction principle of the whole city⁹, the cemeterial districts of Karacaahmet and Eyüp are built based on systems of axial and visual relation at a great distance, toward the sea and the emerging urban elements.

The city of Fez is an interesting case for what concerns the relationship between urban and cemeterial settlement. The expanded graveyards are located above hills outside the medina's walls, next to the gates, from which they also borrow the toponymy: Bab Ftouh, Bab al-Hamra, Bab Guissa¹⁰, Bab Mahrouk, Bab Segma.

These settlements are entirely part of the urban landscape composition. These wide, open spaces, entirely covered by white tombs partially coated with *zellij*¹¹, have an essentially rural character but seem to reproduce the medina's architectural density at a different scale. The concept of volumetric unity, accepting variable heights and shapes, directly represents the Islamic Tradition, namely the Sunnah, which determines human activities and, consequently, the city construction (Burckhardt 2002, p. 160).

**Fig. 4**

Eliana Martinelli, The medina of Fez and its cemeteries (in light blue), 2021.

The cemeteries of Fez look at each other from different hills, and at the same time, offer a preferential point of view toward the medina. Like in the cemeterial districts of Istanbul, the burials are laid on the topography; in this case, the tombs crowd, filling the space uniformly up to the border. The most ancient ones are placed irregularly, as much as possible oriented toward Mecca's Kaaba. The vegetation is low and, for the most part, spontaneous and does not achieve a crucial compositional value.

The position and character of cemeteries, like little fortresses, contributed to the preservation of the ancient medina, not only as a unitary architectural figure, but also as urban structure. The photograph Bruno Barbey wrote in the forward to the book *Fès. Immeuble, immortelle*, edited with Tahar Ben Jelloun (1996): «Fès a été sauvée du béton par ses cimetières. On ne touche pas aux morts. Lorsqu'elle eut fini de pousser comme un arbre, de jeter ses rameaux en impasses, elle s'est corsetée dans ses remparts contre lesquels reposent les ancêtres¹²». Quoting the title of this photographic publication, we could assert that, in the case of Fez, precisely the city of the dead has made the city of the living «immobile, immortal».

The case histories here presented are not exhaustive of the variety of the Mediterranean Islamic cemeteries. However, they serve as examples of the role that these settlements acquire in the urban landscape composition. Even if considering the diversity of rites of the Islamic world, some shared features can constitute the premise to host “cities in the cities”, that is to say, to build new cities of the dead based on the transposition of different urban images, as expressions of diverse settlement cultures. Following the recent migratory phenomenon, a great debate started from the necessity to give burial to the members of always-more-numerous Muslim communities according to their rites and beliefs. Still today, a legislation problem, also connected to the various burial procedures, exists. Nevertheless, the



Fig. 5

Eliana Martinelli, «Analogies of form and surface: the medina of Fez and Bab Ftouh cemetery», collage, 2021.

rule cannot evolve without considering the human norm, deriving from the use and custom and translatable into forms.

In conclusion, we can observe some recurring principles: first of all, the presence of a low enclosure acting as a limit and retaining the ground, without any visual screen between interior and exterior; secondly, the relationship between topography and city, expressed in the replication of a different-scale way of settlement based on the visual connections; in the end, the comparison between mausoleums and minor tombs, almost anonymous and “domestic”, according to an aggregative logic, similarly to the city of the living. These elements are ascribable to specific ideas of urbanity and constitute attracting references to build new landscapes of the dead. As social and not figurative art, architecture acquired the function of exteriorising the faith in the Islamic world (Kowsar 1982, p. 28). This role can be proposed again in the crucial moment of death, the last occasion for a man to share his religious or cultural belonging.

Notes

¹ Those places having the curious feature to be in relation with all the other places, but in a manner that allow them to stop, neutralise and invert the set of relationships summarised, reflected and mirrored by them (Foucault 1994, p. 13). For today's Western culture, the cemetery represents the higher expression of heterotopia, and heterochrony, where time stopped.

² An extreme case, in this sense, is the cemetery of Al-Qarafa at Cairo, the most ancient of Egypt, in which the integration between the two cities is complete. Despite its use, around one million people dwell it, in an extension of more than ten kilometres.

³ According to Paolo Cuneo (1986, p. 89), the Islamic city is recognisable, more than in some recurring urban and constructive typologies, in the more integrated system of relationship between parts, able to combine and aggregate them in a unitary configuration, without denying the individuality of their components.

⁴ Cfr. ch. *La città ottomana come una delle espressioni di città islamica* (Martinelli 2017, pp. 75-83).

⁵ Ensemble of religious, social and cultural buildings, usually, but not always arranged around the mosque (Cerasi 1988, pp. 329-330).

⁶ In Ottoman art, a component repeated in an architectural structure, a sculpture or a painting's composition.

⁷ Vast urban open space, usually irregular in shape (Cerasi 1988, p. 330).

⁸ In this regard, Le Corbusier (1966, p. 71) remembers a Turkish aphorism: «Où l'on bâtit, on plante des arbres» (where one builds, he plants trees).

⁹ Cfr. ch. *Il sistema di relazioni e l'invenzione del suolo* (Martinelli 2017, pp. 149-187).

¹⁰ Next to the Bab el-Guissa cemetery, the gigantic tomb's ruins of the Marinid Sultanate, which reigned from 1248 to 1465, stand.

¹¹ Glazed tiles made of terracotta, produced with the white clay of Fez.

¹² «Fez has been preserved from concrete by its cemeteries. Dead must not be touched. When it stopped to grow up like a tree, sprouting its little branches into blind alleys, it clung to its bastions, into which ancestors rest» (translation by the author). On this theme cfr. Pireddu A. (2021) – *Les pierres du temps. Le regard de Tahar Ben Jelloun, Bruno Barbey et Jean Marc Tingaud sur la médina*, in L. Hadda (ed.), *Médina. Espace de la Méditerranée*, Firenze University Press, Florence, pp. 25-41.

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