

Claudia Sansò

**The place of return. Settlement principles of the Islamic tomb**

---

**Abstract**

The Islamic concept of *Ma'da* as “place of return” indicates the circular nature of Muslim ritual by denying a clear separation between a “ritual that follows” and a “ritual that hands on”.

In *Dar al Islam*, the sense of the sacred is translated to form not only through the buildings of the mosques, – the most representative spaces of Muslim collective living – but also through a large number of tombs/mausoleums.

The contribution proposes to investigate the construction of the Muslim tomb in the transition from ritual to architectural form in order to infer the role that the construction of funerary spaces (especially mausoleums) covers in the settlement logic of Islamic cities, where the spaces of ordinary life often coexist with the spaces of death.

**Keywords**

Islamic ritual — Return place — Islamic tombs — Settlement principles

---

«You shall not dwell in tombs made by the dead for the living»

Gibran Kahlil Gibran

In the book *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran, the migrant Almustafà, after spending twelve years in the land of Orfalese, returns to his native island, Lebanon, which represents the allegory of Absolute Life. At the city's port there is a ship waiting for him and people imploring him to stay. Gibran's telling is emblematic of Islam's conception of existence after death. «A moment: and in a brief calm of wind another woman will give birth to me» (1923). With these words Almustafà reminds the people of Orfalese that the time of death is always followed, through a very brief pause, by a resurrection, which is often a real reincarnation.

The transition from the living to the inanimate is translated in terms of architecture through the construction power of form which, in Islamic tombs, instead of delimiting the “sacred” space, emphasises its centrality to indicate the “point of departure”, the place of return. It is exemplary the case of the mausoleum of Isma'il in Bukhara, the oldest Persian tomb: a square pavilion, domed, open on all four sides with the intention of underlining the absence of a gerarchical axuality instead of an absolute centrality. The transformation of the deceased into an “ancestor”, as Mircea Eliade (1969) explains, corresponds to the fusion of the individual into a category of archetype. If, therefore, each man, having reached the “end of life”, must return to the original point where true Life, Absolute Life, awaits him, the rite that “accompanies” him to the place of return also becomes a rite that “passes on”. And yet, Muhammad declares «The most beautiful tomb is the one that disappears from the surface of the earth». Both for

the construction of the space dedicated to Allah and for that of the abode of souls, the only Koranic prescription is in fact the orientation towards Mecca: during life on earth, the faithful must pray looking towards the sacred city and again, just like an eternal cycle, in the life after death, the inanimate body wrapped in an odd number of shrouds (*kafan*), directly in contact with the earth, must be arranged so that the body resting on the right side looks towards the *Kaaba*.

In the tomb the soul is examined by the assistants of ‘Izrā’īl, the angel of death, about the deeds carried out during life. All souls will inhabit the tomb as a place of “passage” until the Day of Judgment, (Yawm al-Dīn). Those who have proved that they belonged to a man or woman of profound faith will be shown the beauties of the Paradise that awaits them. On the other hand, souls who confess to an impious earthly life will be foretold the pains of Hell. The Judgement of God will arrive and will weigh the souls by placing on the two plates of an eschatological balance (*mīzān*) the sheets on which the angels have written down all the good and bad works done in life. After the response, the souls will cross a bridge over Hell: the souls with the most unworthy deeds will fall down, those with the most meritorious deeds will continue on the path that will lead to a spring where they can quench their thirst before entering the Paradise garden.

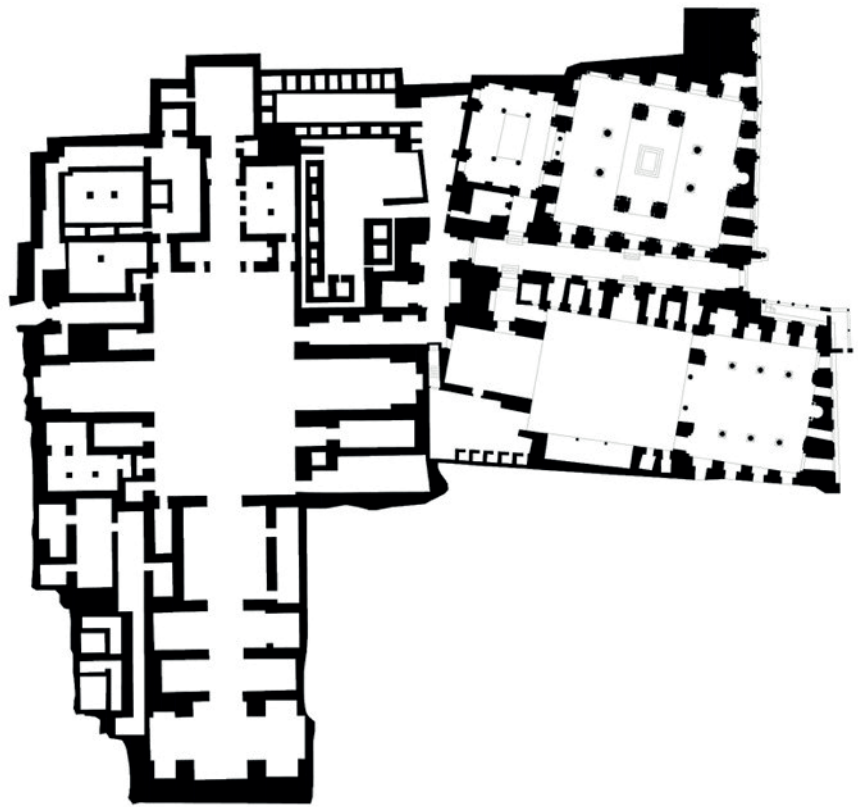
### **The edification of the Islamic tomb: settlement principles of the “place of return” monument**

Carlos Martí Arís affirms that «Every ritual refers to a form: the procedure through which activity acquires a stable form constitutes architecture. Hence the profound link between architecture and ritual, not only in traditional cultures where the organisation of space is a transparent reflection of a ritual referring to the cosmological order, but also in the modern world where architecture has lost its ancient sacredness» (1990).

Early Muslim doctrine forbade any architectural glorification of tombs because they were derived from improper Christian or Jewish customs. As Oleg Grabar (1989) reminds us, *taswiyah al-qubur*, «equalisation of the graves (with the surrounding land)», was considered the most appropriate expression of the equality of all men in death. Add to this the fact that the Prophet had said: «A building is the vainest of undertakings that can devour the wealth of a believer» and it seems almost inexplicable the large number of buildings constructed in the lands of Dar al Islam that have to do with the concept of the “sacred”: among them include many tombs and mausoleums. Titus Burckhardt (1989) suggests, however, that such generous building in Muslim cities can be traced back to the veneration of the wali, the saints, considered in the Qur’an not as dead but as «living without you hearing them», and the desire of caliphs and sultans to “pass on” their names.

What is built, therefore, is not an architecture that can “contain” the tomb, but a creation that is able to sign the place of return, so deserved by the one who lies there. The man who is buried no more than a metre under that piece of earth has performed such exemplary deeds in his earthly life that he has earned a monument as a reward at the moment of his death, or rather his passage to Absolute life.

In fact, some tombs are highly decorated pavilions, while others are buildings in their own right, sometimes attached to other facilities, with particular settlement patterns that differ according to the urban culture of the cities in which they are located. Two extraordinary examples, synthesising these distinct “urban grammars”, are the Qala’un complex in Cairo and



**Fig. 1**  
Qala'un complex building, Cairo.

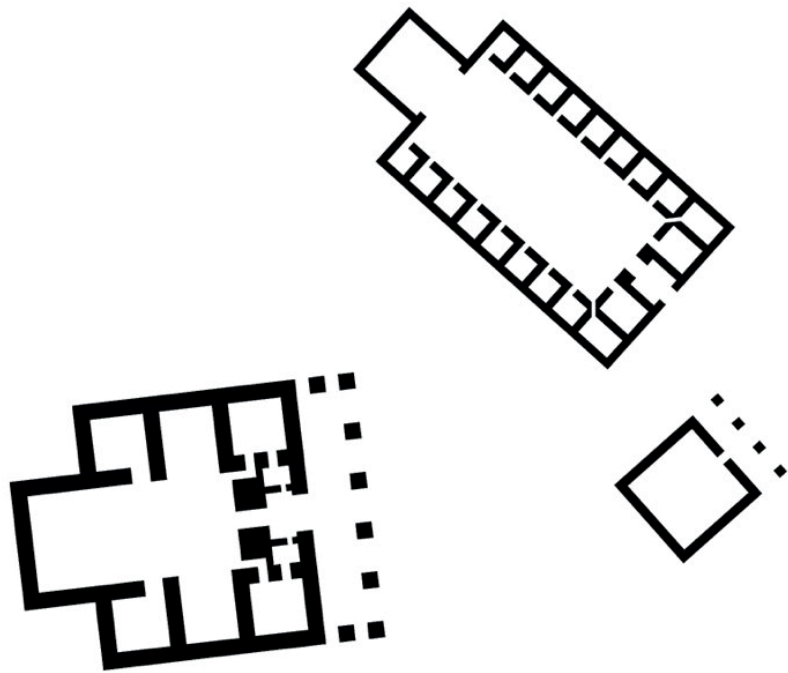
the Yldirim kullyye in Bursa, the former adhering to a “syntactic” composition in which a “closed” spatial order prevails, the second preferring a “paratactic” model that constructs “open” perspectives.

The tomb is an element/figure in these compositions.

In the building in Cairo, the spaces of the madrasa (Koranic school), the maristan (hospital) and the tomb are concentrated in a large plant. The madrasa and the tomb rotate as a single body inside the large complex, to support the correct orientation towards Mecca. A long corridor separating the teaching areas from the burial space, dedicated to the remains of Sultan Qala'un, leads to the cruciform iwan-type hospital, which was destroyed. The tomb building is constructed by mirroring the space – similar but not identical in shape and size – of the court and iwan of the madrasa. A small atrium advertises the space of the almost square hall of the turbah (tomb in Arabic), from which the Turkish term *türbe*, meaning “earth”.

In Muslim culture, both Arab and Ottoman, the sovereigns provided the city with public buildings and completed the work by erecting for themselves a monument to the afterlife as a “place of reward”.

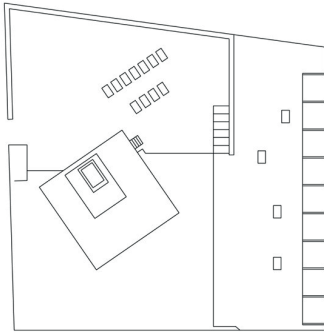
If in the Arab Islamic city the concentration of several spaces in a single syntax is typical of an urban fabric that assigns to the enclosure both the construction of houses and of public and collective buildings, the configuration of the Ottoman city is conferred on a dispositional mode that defines a topological system based on architectural objects “aggregated” in tension by the same space that separates them. In the *kullyye* of Istanbul, architectural complexes still follow a spatial logic of interiority. In this case, in fact, the tombs are located in a system of large enclosures arranged in succession: the *shan*, the mosque, the small garden/cemetery, as happens in the Fatih kullyye, for example.



**Fig. 2**  
Yldirim kulliyeh, Bursa.

In Bursa, on the contrary, these building complexes respond to an urban syntax that adheres to a spatial logic of externality, where the elements are not linked by a system of enclosures but by a “conjunction” entrusted to the unbuilt space that interposes itself. The formal system of mosque, madrasa and *türbe* resists by difference and by grain the thickening of the urban fabric around it. In particular, in the Yldirim kulliyeh, the three elements represent the figures of the composition: the mosque is placed on a podium slightly higher than the two elements of the madrasa and the tetra-style domed hall that defines the *türbe*. The mosque is placed with the orientation towards Mecca, the madrasa rotates 50° with respect to it and the small tomb building assumes the same position as the Koranic school but placed orthogonally to it. This triangulation generates a tension in which the tomb element participating in the urban grammar completes the tripartite composition. In this way a singular place is constructed through “solitary” elements, in which the urban space takes on a “sacred” character not only because of the theme to which each architecture responds but because of its meaning of “separated”, “set at a distance”. «The sacred is that which in itself remains at a distance, at a distance, and with which there can be no connection (or only a very paradoxical connection). It is what cannot be touched (or can only be touched without contact)» (Nancy 2007).

An interesting recent Islamic tomb construction is the Rafic Hariri Memorial, built in Beirut by the French firm Marc Barani<sup>1</sup>. In memory of the ex-prime minister of Lebanon, Rafiq Hariri, assassinated in 2005 during a bomb attack, not a building is erected but a square, a large podium next to the Al-Amine mosque. «The burial place of this public man will be a public space» (Barani, 2019). On the plinth, the eleven graves of Hariri’s



**Fig. 3**  
Memorial Rafic Hariri.



**Fig. 4**  
Memorial Rafic Hariri.

bodyguards that emerge in rectangular stone blocks, along with a large, taller square representing the former prime minister's burial place, are oriented, along with the large mosque, towards Mecca.

In the Islamic world, unlike the Western world, death is not considered taboo, and this is manifested in the way “death spaces” are established within the city, but they are spaces where life takes place, “special” spaces, or rather extra-ordinary spaces in a double measure, because they are distinct from the idea that builds the space of individual living by repetition, and because they are spaces in which the numinous “encounter” between the tangible and the intangible, between man and the divine, is staged<sup>2</sup>. These are the “sacred” spaces, where, as Károly Kerényi (2001) warns us, due to the full awareness of the difference between what is made real and what cannot be, the festivity takes place as a collective spiritual experience. By separating a part from the mundane whole in order to sacralise it, a choice has been made because one recognises an object, a form or a space that differs from the rest. «In the midst of so many other stones, a stone becomes sacred – and consequently finds itself instantly saturated with being – because it constitutes a “hierophany”, or possesses *mana*, or its form reveals a certain symbolism, or even because it reminds one of a mythical act, etc. The object appears as a receptacle of an external force that differentiates it from its environment and gives it meaning and value» (Eliade, 1968).

The tomb/mausoleum thus participates in the construction of collective space, sometimes adjacent to the spaces of Koranic learning, sometimes through “paratactic” systems of several elements, together with the spaces of daily prayer, until it becomes an opportunity for the redefinition of a public space, offering the places of death to the unfolding of life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Marie-Anne Ducrocq, *La tomba di Rafiq Hariri a Beirut: la scommessa del vuoto*, "Compasses", n. 31, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, Gallimard, Paris 1965.

## References

BURCKHARDT T., (1974) – *L'arte sacra in Oriente e in Occidente. L'estetica del sacro*, Bompiani, Milan.

BURCKHARDT T., (2002) – *L'arte dell'Islam*, Abscondita, Milan.

DUCROCQ M.A., (20019) – *La tomba di Rafiq Hariri a Beirut: la scommessa del vuoto*, "Compasses", n. 31, 2019.

ELIADE M., (1965) – *Le sacré et le profane*, Gallimard, Paris. [trad. it. *Il sacro e il profano*, edited by Edoardo Fadini, Universale Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 1968].

FUSARO F., *La città islamica*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1984.

GRABAR O., (1989) – *Arte islamica: formazione di una civiltà*, Electa, Milan.

HOAG J.D., *Architettura islamica*, Electa, Milan 1973.

KERÉNY K., (2001) – *Religione antica*, Adelphi, Milan.

MICARA L., *Architetture e spazi dell'Islam. Le istituzioni collettive e la vita urbana*, Carocci, Rome 1985.

PETRUCCIOLI A., (1985) – *Dar al Islam: architetture del territorio nei paesi islamici*, Carucci, Rome.

Claudia Sansò (Naples, 1988) is a PhD in Architectural and Urban Composition at the DiARC, University of Naples "Federico II". She has been a visiting researcher at the *Instituto Universitario de Arquitectura y Ciencias de la Construcción IUACC*, ETSA Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Sevilla and a research fellow at the DiARC, University of Naples "Federico II". She is the author of the volume *La moschea e l'Occidente. Tipi architettonici e forme urbana* and editor in chief of *DAR\_design, architecture research*, bi-annual international journal of architecture in the Islamic world.