Historiography of the Islamic city

Review of:

Paul Wheatley, *The places where men pray together: cities in Islamic lands, seventh though the tenth centuries*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001, ISBN-10: 0226894282, ISBN-13: 978-0226894287, 590 pp.

Does the 'Islamic city' exist? If so, what exactly is Islamic about it? Geographer, Paul Wheatley, contributes to this discourse by examining settlement patterns and institutions of urban forms during the first four centuries of Islam. He analyzes how Islam changed the urban fabric of new and old cities in the highly urbanized regions of the Middle East and Africa. Wheatley argues that while Arab conquests provided a new set of institutions and urban hierarchies, the spatial forms of cities remained unchanged, and newly constructed cities were not built to look like Makkah. He develops his argument by updating and expanding the descriptions of settlements in Islamic lands collected by al-Maqdisi, a tenth century geographer. In addition to the *'iyan* (lived experience), eyewitness reports, the Qur'an, and secular sources which informed al-Maqdisi's Best Divisions for the Knowledge of Regions, Wheatley employs the works of other ninth and tenth century scholars, geographers, and topographers, medieval Islamic road books and *adab* literature. He then meticulously details thirteen urban systems in the Islamic world, as categorized by al-Maqdisi. For each urban system, he describes the marketing and service centres, transport foci, industrial and craft centres, fortified settlements, and religious centres, similar to al-Maqdisi's hierarchy of 'functional urban regions' (67) from metropolis to smaller towns. Using the urban systems as evidence, Wheatley concludes that early Islamic lands were not united by common urban design; instead, the Arabs provided urban structures, like theocracy and Islamic law and commerce, to allow Islam to flourish in new settlements without displacing pre-Islamic spatial patterns.

Similar to how Oleg Grabar's *The formation of Islamic art* lays the foundation for Islamic art and architecture, this book plays an instrumental role in describing early Islamic urbanism. Wheatley effectively uses the case studies of the urban systems to prove his hypothesis that early Islamic lands did not share a common form but served similar functions. For example, in Iraq, he describes how settlement patterns were tied to water sources before and after the arrival of Islam because the Arabs did not possess the required environmental technology to distribute water. However, the Arabs changed development patterns and urban hierarchies in Iraq by building new princely and garrison settlements. They only invested in agricultural development near their newly built cities, which led to selective development throughout urban Iraq. Using carefully researched case studies such as this,

Wheatley presents a convincing argument that Islam changed institutions and development patterns but not the spatial form of cities.

However, he overemphasizes the role of Arab conquests in the development of pre-Islamic cities without considering pre-existing economic and urbanization trends. For example, he writes that in al-Sham, some cities were prospering and that some were on the verge of extinction, trends which were not reversed after the arrival of Islam. For the purpose of describing early Islamic settlements, Wheatley only examines the role that Islam might have played in development patterns, while ignoring other variables which may have affected medieval urban patterns and growth. However, correlation does not imply direct causation. What other factors besides the arrival of Islam could have effected similar changes in urban hierarchies? How would the trajectories of cities in the *Jahiliyah* have changed without Islamic intervention? Would the settlements in al-Sham have continued to grow under the domain of Christian conquerors? These thought experiments would have allowed Wheatley to more accurately weight the role of Islamic institutions in shaping urbanization and development patterns.

Besides ignoring variables beyond Islam in the development of cities, his method also exhibits inferential bias. Wheatley is using mostly ninth and tenth century sources to update a largely experiential tenth century account, which often describes settlements as 'the province (al-Jibal) with the finest milk and honey, the most appetizing bread and the strongest saffron'(136) and as 'the province (Fars) with the most ingenious people and merchants, and the most widespread profligacy'. (136) Even allowing for this subjectivity, how is Wheatley able to trace the development of cities from the seventh to the tenth centuries with only ninth and tenth century sources? While he often acknowledges the limitation of data and sources throughout the book, his conclusions do not. Instead of ambitiously inferring insights about city development through numerous lenses of retrospective analysis, Wheatley could have understood and worked within the limitations of his sources to focus exclusively on the tenth century. After all, he does claim that urban development in the Islamic world only reached its formative phase in the second half of the tenth century. (136)

The content of the book is often inaccessible because of the confusing language and the lack of a consistent meta-narrative. In an effort to be precise, Wheatley liberally uses Arabic words, providing the English translation only when the word first appears in the text. In a text spanning more than 300 pages, following his line of thought becomes complicated when constantly stuck on unfamiliar words. Further, he often lapses into technical terms when describing the geography of a region. The use of more maps and visual aids could have helped in understanding Wheatley's language, al-Maqdisi's categorization of urban regions, and the evolution of settlements.

Meticulous and excruciating detail is both a boon and a bane in this book. While Wheatley has managed to extract extensive information about early Islamic urbanism from a wide variety of sources, he includes so much detail in his

descriptions and analyses that the forest is lost for the trees. Considering the book has appendices and footnotes covering more than 200 pages, such detail in the main part of the book is unnecessary and disrupts Wheatley's narrative. For example, in the discussion of Hawqal, one of his sources, he writes:

> Hawqal's compendium was the schedule of general geographic information entitled Hudud al-Alam, which was compiled by an anonymous author in A.H. 372/A.D.982-83 and dedicated to Amit Abu al_Harith Muhammad ibn Ahmad of the Farighunid dynasty ruling in Guzaganan. In 1258 this unique manuscript was copied by Abu al-Mu'ayyad 'Abd al-Qayyum ibn al-Husayn ibn 'Ali al-Farisi. It was this copy that was discovered in Bukhara in 1892 by Mirza Abu al-Fadl Gulpayagani; brought to the attention of Russian orientalists by Major-General A.G. Tumansky; published under the posthumous editorship of V.V. Barthold in 1930 and again by Mancuhir Sutudah in 1962; printed by Sayyid Jalal al-Din Tihrani as an annex to his Calendar for the Persian Year 1314; and translated into English with exhaustive annotation by V. Minorsky.(68)

Is this level of detail absolutely necessary to follow Wheatley's minor point?

In addition to superfluous information, the lack of a meta-narrative illustrates the tension between al-Maqdisi's and Wheatley's aims. Is the book just a 'description of the provinces of the Islamic domain' (63) or is it using these descriptions to paint a larger picture of early Islamic urbanism? Wheatley often vacillates between these positions, which reduces the book to a compendium of footnotes loosely linked by pockets of analysis. Only in the third part of the book on urban fabric in the Islamic world does he attempt to tie in themes from the thirteen urban systems discussed in the previous section, which then makes the content repetitive. Perhaps Wheatley should have used al-Maqdisi's book as a source and not as a template.

Despite these flaws, this text provides ample material for different avenues of research. A comparative analysis of early Christian and Islamic cities would be fascinating in examining the different effects, if any, of the religions on urbanization and development. Alternatively, in honor of Wheatley's background in ancient Eastern and Southeast Asian urban history, one could compare and contrast drivers and patterns of settlements between East Asia and the early Islamic world.

Another direction of research could follow the hierarchy of sanctity, which refers to the different degrees of holiness attached to urban forms. An inter-temporal analysis of how this hierarchy has changed or has remained the same could yield interesting insights in the discourse on the sacred and the profane in Islamic spaces. How has this hierarchy changed with the expansion of the Islamic diaspora? Does each world region have a unique hierarchy with Makkah at the top? Does the hierarchy of sanctity translate into a hierarchy of Islamic art and architecture? For example, is contemporary Islamic architecture produced by Saudi

Arabia considered more 'Islamic' or more authentic than that located in the south of Thailand? In laying out descriptions of early Islamic settlements, he has allowed for a rich set of questions to be developed across different time periods and regions.

This book also provides a fascinating comparison between Wheatley and al-Maqdisi. Although separated by eleven centuries, both geographers are attempting to imagine a unified early Islamic civilization. Al-Maqdisi wrote about Islamic urban systems at a time when the Islamic civilization was beginning to fragment. Wheatley's text arrives in a Huntingtonian world, where the Islamic community is the collective global enemy. While al-Maqdisi's work is driven by nostalgia and the desire for an integrated Islamic utopia, Wheatley's book serves to unpack the many doubts the West has about the Islamic world: what exactly is Islamic about the Islamic world? How has Islam penetrated and transformed socio-economic and political structures? Are the effects of Islam uniform across space and time? Much like Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, both al-Maqdisi's account and Wheatley's update describe imagined, reconstructed cities in the Islamic world. Yet, these authors ultimately describe different cities because of the different states of geopolitics at the time of writing. Al-Maqdisi is more concerned with what Calvino characterized in his book as cities and memory, while Wheatley's writing is about cities and signs - what are the symbols of Islam in the built environment and what do they mean?

In his semiotic analysis of the early Islamic world, Wheatley concludes that cities are united by common institutions and hierarchies and not urban design. Although he does not explicitly state that an Islamic city exists, he does mention that institutions influenced by Islam are enough to call a city Islamic. For example, he writes that 'Iranian, Hellenistic, Latin, and other urban patterns had been transformed by the Arab occupation and augmented with new Arab foundations, and all had come to manifest to a greater or lesser degree the imprint of Islam.'(62) This 'imprint of Islam' refers to institutions and urban hierarchies imposed by Arab conquests, which are symbolized by the Islamic architectural features of a city, like a centrally located mosque with a tall tower and a *souk*.

Further, the title of his book refers to a quote from the Hadith, where the Prophet refers to cities as places where Islam and civilization flourish and the desert as the land of the *Jahiliyah*. Wheatley thus infers that the 'Islamic city' does exist. It would be compelling to extend his research into the twenty-first century to investigate what makes so-called Islamic cities Islamic, and to explore what aspects of 'Islamicness' change and what remain fixed.

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