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2 Religion in Islamic Archaeology

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7 Introduction

8 As an area of enquiry specifically concerned with
9 one of the principal world faiths, Islamic archae-
10 ology has developed mostly within a secular
11 tradition, and the attention paid to religion is
12 fairly limited. The reasons for this are complex
13 and have much to do with the development of
14 archaeology as a secular field of enquiry in
15 Europe and America. The majority of archaeolo-
16 gists working on Islamic material to date have
17 been non-Muslims who perhaps felt ill-qualified
18 to remark on the religious implications of their
19 finds. In addition as with all world religions, there
20 is a potential conflict between the revealed truth
21 of the scriptures and the revelations of archaeol-
22 ogy. While this has never become a major obsta-
23 cle for Islamic archaeology, the scope for
24 potential misunderstanding has meant that issues
25 concerning the origins of the faith have generally
26 been avoided. With these limitations in mind,
27 archaeology has made some important contribu-
28 tions to the study of Islam both as a religious
29 practice and as a diverse set of beliefs. One of
30 the challenges of Islamic archaeology is to
31 acknowledge the profound sense of unity within

the faith while also demonstrating the diversity 32
and variations from contemporary established 33
beliefs. 34

Definition 35

The study of Islam as a religion may be firmly 36
placed within the wider concept of the archaeol- 37
ogy of religious belief as defined and character- 38
ized by Insoll (1999). The importance of this 39
approach is that it does not seek to comment on 40
the validity or otherwise of beliefs but rather 41
investigates the material culture(s) of the religion 42
as expressions of the faith. This approach differs 43
from that of comparative religion where beliefs 44
and practices in one religion are compared to 45
and often equated with those of another faith. 46
While the comparative view allows an overview 47
of religious developments, its tendency to gener- 48
alize and assumption of an interchangeability of 49
belief both deny the agency of the individual and 50
assume a superior position for the investigator. 51

As a field of enquiry, Islamic archaeology has 52
been primarily concerned with the development 53
and manifestations of Islamic society and culture. 54
Particular attention has been paid to the first three 55
centuries of Islamic civilization when the religion 56
was largely coterminous with a single Islamic 57
state or caliphate. The breakup of the Abbasid 58
caliphate in the tenth century and the resulting 59
political fragmentation created new power blocks 60
based partly on different interpretations of Islam 61
and partly on ethnic and cultural affiliations. 62

The advent of the Crusades in the twelfth century and increasing political fragmentation has meant that much of the historical and archaeological interest in medieval Islam has focussed on conflict either as holy war (*jihad*) or power struggles amongst competing Muslim rulers. However, in the Indian Ocean and Central Asia, both archaeology and history point to societies where the Muslim faith linked traders across vast distances from Cairo to China. The European discovery and exploitation of the New World coincided with profound changes in the Islamic world. There was a return to larger political entities such as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires, each with their own religious agenda. The archaeology of the recent past in the Islamic world (nineteenth and twentieth centuries) has focussed on an increasing European presence either through trade or colonial encounters as well as warfare.

Historical Background

[I]n 1343 . . . a resident of Cairo unearthed what he claimed to be an old mosque. A "rowdy" named Shu'ayb could not miss this golden opportunity. He claimed that an apparition revealed to him that the site was an ancient grave of a Companion of the Prophet. . . . Excavations were begun by the commoners, including women, and indeed a "shrine" surfaced. That new discovery further increased the number of visitors, and industrious Shu'ayb organized "guided tours" for fees, in which wives of dignitaries also took part (al-Maqrizi, *Suluk li ma'arif al-duwal al-muluk* II: 649-50; Shoshan 1993: 9).

Although Islamic archaeology is currently dominated by a secular European outlook, there are enough examples of Muslims carrying out excavations or studies of ancient material to suggest an archaeological tradition of some antiquity. The example of Shu'ayb (cited above) is interesting because it demonstrates an understanding of archaeological processes by the general public (e.g., buildings collapse, accumulation of material over time, excavation as a means of discovery, and the presentation of archaeology to the public). The other dimension to this discovery is the creation of a religious

shrine which according to al-Maqrizi became the site of nightly celebrations until they were discontinued by the religious authorities. Although in this particular instance the orthodox religious establishment did not recognize the shrine, there are many instances where ancient sites were rediscovered and became shrines and centers of visitation. Such activities were particularly popular during the medieval period with prominent examples of rediscovery including the tomb of the Biblical Moses (Nabi Musa) in Palestine, the tomb of Jonah (Nabi Yunus) at Nineveh in Iraq, and Moulay Idris in Morocco. In each case some ancient remains were discovered and associated with some historical event or personage. Moulay Idris is a predominantly eighteenth-century shrine built around the mausoleum of Idris II (r.803–828) whose body was rediscovered in 1308. The shrine of Nabi Yunus is located on the site of ancient Nineveh and was built directly over the ruins of a Christian church. The shrine complex of Nabi Musa was built by the Mamluk Sultan Baybars in 1269 when the grave of Musa was rediscovered. In each case the shrine was built around an ancient relic or site which was both historically plausible and also tangible providing an authenticity which appeared to be lacking in Shu'ayb's discovery of 1343. All of this indicates that there was an empirical and rational understanding of the relationship between the present and the past which is akin to that of modern archaeology.

The Quran provides a basis for understanding the relationship of the past to the present with the story of the cave (Surah 18) in which a number of youths fall asleep in a cave and are awakened 309 years later. When they try to buy food, they are discovered because of their use of old silver coins which were no longer in circulation. The Quran (Surah 7) also explains how the polytheists of al-Hijr (Medain Salih) were punished for persisting in idol worship so that eventually they were killed and their city left in ruins. An appreciation of the processes of change over time is therefore a fundamental part of being Muslim.

One of the earliest and most important examples of archaeological work in relation to Islam was carried out when the Ka'ba in Mecca was

rebuilt after its destruction by Ibn Zubayr in 683. Before the Ka'ba was rebuilt, a detailed investigation of the site revealed earlier foundations interpreted as Abraham's original construction. During the process meticulous notes were made including a detailed analysis of the Black Stone at the corner (Peeters 1994: 62-4).

Later on it is evident that there was an awareness of the value of studying ancient remains; thus, the prominent Egyptian scholar 'Abd al-Latif (1162–1231) had a deep respect for the learning of the ancients and their monuments (Richter-Bernberg 2007). In a statement in his book on Egypt, he summarizes the reason for preserving ancient monuments as follows:

Antiquities should endure as markers of a remote epoch and reminders of the ages since elapsed. They will serve as witness to the revealed scriptures for the venerable Koran mentions them and their people; thus by seeing them, narration becomes experience and tradition is verified... They indicate something of the forebears' circumstances and conduct, the amplex of their learning and the clairvoyance of their notions. ('Abd al-Latif, *Akhbar Misr*; Richter-Bernberg 2007: 365)

In addition to scholars directly interested in ancient remains, it is also worth noting that there was a sophisticated historical tradition in the Islamic world with writers such as al-Tabari providing detailed historical accounts of world history. However, perhaps the most sophisticated appreciation of history is found in the writings of the Ibn Khaldun who developed a philosophy of history based on his analysis of historical events in his native North Africa. This historical awareness provided a framework for understanding archaeological remains.

During the nineteenth century European interest in the antiquities of the Middle East and North Africa was often met with suspicion by local Muslims. Part of this mistrust was a feeling that objects of value might be discovered and exported without benefit to the natives of the region. However, there was also a feeling that Europeans would use antiquities to give their own contrasting interpretations of history. In some cases these misgivings were justified and Edward Said's book *Orientalism* documents how Europeans used archaeological investigations as

a means of gaining information to help in their colonial endeavors (Said 1978). However, despite the disproportionate military and economic power of the Europeans, the authorities in Muslim countries were able to exercise some control on the activities of foreign (and indigenous) archaeologists. Thus, in 1884 Osman Hadi the director of the Archaeological Museum in Constantinople (Istanbul) enacted the first Ottoman antiquities law placing all excavations under the control of the Ministry of Education (Vernoit 1998). In general however from the nineteenth century onwards, archaeology in the Muslim world was dominated by Europeans (and Americans) who had both the resources and the training to carry out systematic investigations.

As Islamic archaeology developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the main interests were art and architectural history rather than investigation of Islam as a religion. Archaeologists working on Islamic sites were interested in the retrieval of objects of Islamic art for display in museums and in the recording of monumental architecture. There were however some areas where European archaeologists showed an interest in the religious aspect of Islamic material culture. For example, Conrad Preusser made a study of Islamic shrines and Christian churches in northern Iraq while attached to the German excavations at Babylon in the early twentieth century. In early twentieth-century Palestine, there was considerable interest in Muslim shrines partly because it was thought that they may relate to some Biblical sites and partly because archaeologists working in the Holy Land were predisposed to look at religious aspects of antiquity.

The other specifically religious aspect of Muslim culture that interested nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeologists and art historians was the question of iconoclasm or prohibition of figural images. Following excavation of Umayyad sites in Syria and present-day Jordan and Palestine, it became apparent that the religious ban on the portrayal of human figures was not universally applied. For example, semi-nude female figures were painted onto the walls

of the bath house at Qusayr ‘Amra in Jordan, while at Khirbat al-Mafjar there were stucco figurines of semi-naked women also in the bath house. However, in certain areas and times, the figural ban was implemented, most famously in the 690s when Abd al-Malik (685–705) replaced figural coinage with purely epigraphic coins (Walmsley 2007: 59–64). For some archaeologists the implementation of the ban on figural images was aimed particularly at Christians and was seen as a sign of Muslim intolerance. For example, John Crowfoot commenting on the damaged mosaics of Jarash wrote “...all representations of living creatures were ruthlessly destroyed. The sorry way in which the mutilations were repaired shows the wretched plight of the Christians” (Crowfoot 1938: 172–3).

Key Issues

The religious nature of Islamic society expressed through Islamic laws and customs has meant that all areas of Muslim life are potentially relevant to archaeology. However, a number of areas of investigation are of particular relevance to an understanding of the religion. These may be summarized as mosques; *hajj* routes; shrines, mausolea and burials; and *halal* diet.

Mosques

As the most visible symbol of the Muslim faith, mosques are an ideal subject for archaeological research particularly as they have been part of Islamic culture from the start (Figs. 1 and 2). When investigating ancient remains, the presence or absence of a mosque is often the best indicator of whether the former inhabitants had adopted Islam as a religion. It is even possible to get an indication of the possible number of Muslims in a settlement at a particular time. For example, the Byzantine and early Islamic settlement of Shivta in the Negev had three churches and a small mosque attached to one of the churches suggesting a Muslim minority in a Christian town (Magness 2003).

There are however some problems with using mosques as an indicator which may be

summarized as (i) the identification of a building as a mosque, (ii) dating the period of construction and use, and (iii) problems associated with investigating mosques still in use.

The easiest way to identify a mosque is by the presence or absence of a *mihrab* which is a concave niche inserted into the wall of the prayer hall to indicate the direction of Mecca and consequently the direction of prayer (*qibla*). Even if a *mihrab* is not found, the orientation of a building to the *qibla* (direction of Mecca) will suggest that a building is a mosque. However, there are problems with both these indicators. The earliest mosques did not have a *mihrab* in the form of a concave niche.

The first concave *mihrab* was inserted into the Prophet’s Mosque at Medina during some restorations carried out by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I in 706. The date of the introduction of the *mihrab* niche is confirmed by excavations at Wasit, Iraq, where two mosques were found built one on top of the other. The earliest mosque, dated to the seventh century, did not have a concave *mihrab*, while the later eighth-century mosque had a *mihrab* niche. Similarly the orientation of a building may be misleading because many early mosques were misaligned. In most cases however both the alignment and the presence of a *mihrab* will confirm a building’s function as a mosque.

In terms of dating mosque construction and use, often it will be possible to get an idea of the date of a mosque from a foundation inscription. However, in many cases this will either be missing or the inscription may come from an earlier building. In addition the fact that mosques are not used for residential purposes means that an excavated mosque will rarely contain dateable material. Once a site has been designated for use as a mosque, it will tend to retain this function through time. In practice this means that many apparently new buildings are built on older foundations or may even incorporate portions of an earlier structure, which are thus not easily accessible to archaeologists.

344 Hajj Routes

345 The *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five
346 obligations held by all Muslims. If a person has
347 the necessary means and is physically able, the
348 pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime is obliga-
349 tory. Given the rapid geographical spread of
350 Islam from the seventh century onwards, this
351 has meant that a network of pilgrimage routes
352 from all over the world converges on Mecca
353 (Petersen 1994). There have been a number
354 of archaeological studies of these routes most
355 notably the Darb Zubayda from Iraq, the Darb
356 al-Hajj al-Shami from Syria, and the Darb al-Hajj
357 al-Masri from North Africa.

358 Shrines, Mausolea, and Burials

359 Shrines, mausolea, and burials are three
360 connected issues within the archaeological study
361 of Islam. Firstly it is worth mentioning that all
362 schools of Muslim thought agree that burials
363 should be simple and that graves should not be
364 marked with extravagant structures. However, in
365 practice throughout the Muslim world, there have
366 been elaborate grave markers and mausolea have
367 been built around the graves of particularly prom-
368 inent individuals (Fig. 3). Where the individual
369 concerned is thought to have been particularly
370 pious, valiant, or important, the mausolea have
371 often become shrines venerated by Muslims
372 (Fig. 4). There have been many archaeological
373 studies focussing on these issues (Petersen 1996,
374 1999, 2001). Some draw attention to the fact that
375 shrines provide a religious focus for women,
376 illiterate people, and others who feel excluded
377 from more formal religious practices at mosques.

378 Halal Diet

379 Muslims are governed by dietary laws dictating
380 what food is permissible (*halal*) and what is for-
381 bidden (*haram*). The most well-known prohibi-
382 tion is against eating pigs, although many other
383 categories of food are restricted. Environmental
384 archaeology can investigate deposits to gain an
385 idea of whether a particular society was following
386 Muslim dietary rules (for a discussion see Insoll
387 1999: 4-107). In southeast Asia the analysis of
388 animal bones has been used to determine at what
389 stages particular communities are converted to

Islam (Lape 2005). However, it is known that in
certain cases, people describing themselves as
Muslim have ignored some of these rules; thus,
evidence of wine consumption has been found at
early Islamic sites, and it is known that some Sufi
sects also drank wine as part of their activities.

International Perspectives

Within the archaeology of religion, international
perspectives may be interpreted as the interaction
with other faiths. Four examples will be used to
indicate how archaeology can inform and in some
cases inflame conflicts centering on religious
sites.

The partition of India into India and Pakistan
in 1948 polarized Muslim and Hindu sentiments,
and both countries are still dealing with the
consequences. In terms of archaeology and heri-
tage, the most well-known incident was the
destruction of the mosque (Babur Masjid) at
Ayodhya in 1992 by supporters of the Hindu
nationalist party (Nandini 1999). The demolition
of the mosque led to rioting in which more than
2,000 people were killed, and the incident still
incites violence. The mosque was built in 1528 by
one of the generals of the Mughal Emperor Babur
on a site which according to Hindus marks the
place where the Hindi deity Lord Ram was born.
In September 2010 following an archaeological
investigation which revealed an earlier (Hindu?)
building, custody of the site was divided between
Muslims and Hindus.

The second example is the Dome of the Rock
in Jerusalem which is believed to stand on the site
of the Jewish temple which had been destroyed
by the Romans. The bitter conflict between Israel
and Palestine has focussed on Jerusalem and in
particular on the area of the Haram al-Sharif. For
Muslims this is the third holiest shrine and the
destination of Muhammad's miraculous night
flight from Mecca (Necipoğlu 2008). The inten-
sity of the conflict is such that there have been
several attempts by Jewish extremists to destroy
the building. The plans, a model and even actual
fittings made for the new temple, which is

434 planned once the Dome of the Rock has been
435 destroyed, already exist.

436 At Bamiyan in Afghanistan the situation was
437 reversed when the Taliban destroyed the two
438 monumental Buddhas carved into the cliff. Prior
439 to the destruction the Taliban publicized their
440 intention finally blowing up the statues in 2001.
441 The event was presented as an attack on figural
442 images and idol worship which was intolerable to
443 Muslims. However, archaeological research has
444 indicated that Bamiyan was inhabited by
445 a Muslim population for over 1,000 years without
446 problems (Morgan 2012: 81-130).

447 Finally it is worth considering the mosque of
448 Cordoba in Spain built by the Umayyad caliph
449 Abd al-Rahman in 784 on the site of a church.
450 The mosque was gradually enlarged over a period
451 of 200 years and became one of the most cele-
452 brated mosques in the world (Khouri 1996).
453 Cordoba and the mosque were reconquered by
454 the Christians in 1236, and the mosque was gradu-
455 ally converted into a cathedral. In the sixteenth
456 century major construction work within the for-
457 mer mosque saw the addition of a nave which
458 while visually intrusive is thought by many to
459 have preserved the building from the excesses
460 of the Inquisition which may otherwise have
461 called for the destruction of the entire building.

462 Future Directions

463 A number of difficulties arise when considering
464 the relationship between Islam and archaeology.
465 Three of the most pressing issues are pre-Islamic
466 and Quranic archaeology, Muslim sects and divi-
467 sions, and Islamic practice in archaeology.

468 Pre-Islamic and Quranic Archaeology

469 The general perception of Islamic archaeology is
470 that it investigates the archaeology of Muslim
471 societies from the 630s to the present; however,
472 to some extent it must also consider the pre-
473 Islamic archaeology of Arabia. As a functioning
474 religious center, the *haram* at Mecca is off limits
475 to archaeology, yet we know a certain amount
476 about the shrine from early Arabic authors
477 (Nevo & Koren 1990) which gives a window on

to the pre-Islamic archaeology of the site. 478
Similarly there are some sites such as al-Khaf 479
al-Raqim in Jordan (Walmsley 2007: 141-144) 480
which have been identified as the site of the 481
story of the cave as mentioned in the Quran 482
(Surah 18). Both of these examples are fairly 483
unproblematic; however, there is the potential 484
for an archaeological investigation to encounter 485
material which may challenge the orthodox 486
religious view. 487

488 Muslim Sects and Divisions

Because Islam is a living religion and because 489
extremists have drawn considerable attention to 490
their faith, the archaeology of Islam is faced with 491
considerable challenges. On the one hand as 492
social scientists archaeologists must adopt 493
a neutral detached approach to the field of 494
study, yet it is inevitable that in some cases 495
a particular view will be regarded as support for 496
a particular position. Although Muslims see 497
themselves as part of a single Islamic community 498
(*ummah*), in practice there are many sects, ethnic 499
and cultural affiliations, as well as political 500
configurations which cause major divisions. The 501
problem for the social scientist is that there is 502
considerable pressure to regard any one of these 503
forms as the normative Islam from which other 504
forms deviate. This question is becoming increas- 505
ingly important as communications improve and 506
the ability of wealthier nations to encourage their 507
interpretation of Islam increases. One of the main 508
sectarian divisions is between *Shia* and *Sunni* 509
Muslims, although there are also other groups 510
which have political dimensions such as Sufis, 511
Salafis (Wahabis), and Ibadis. In addition there 512
are groups such as the Bahais and the Druze 513
which originated within Islam but are generally 514
regarded as outside the recognized religion. 515

516 Islamic Practice in Archaeology

While the majority of nineteenth- and twentieth- 517
century archaeologists investigating Islamic cul- 518
ture were from a secular Christian or Jewish 519
background, the number of Muslim archaeolo- 520
gists working either in the field or as academics 521
is increasing steadily. Should the religious faith 522
of an archaeologist matter? And is it preferable to 523

524 have Muslims investigating Islamic sites? In
525 most cases the personal beliefs of the archaeolo-
526 gist will be irrelevant, although in some cases it
527 has been argued that only Muslims are fit to
528 excavate mosques and interpret Islamic culture.
529 Such views are obviously extreme and would
530 lead to a situation where the investigation of the
531 archaeology of another religion or culture
532 became effectively impossible. However, such
533 views may be regarded as a reaction to the
534 European-dominated Orientalist narrative which
535 first characterized Islamic archaeology.

536 Cross-References

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Religion in Islamic Archaeology,

Fig. 1 Mosque of Sayyid Jamal al-Din at Anau, Turkmenistan (built 1446–1457), destroyed by an earthquake in 1948. Note the decorative dragons either side of the main arch



Religion in Islamic Archaeology, Fig. 2 Kutlug Timur Minaret at Kunya Urgench, Turkmenistan (built between 1321 and 1336). Large minarets such as these were not only a visual symbol of Islam but were also memorials to their founders



Religion in Islamic Archaeology, Fig. 3 Grave of holy man at Kunya Urgench, Turkmenistan, with rags tied to poles indicating the prayers of pilgrims, visitors, and relations. This form of religious practice with links to shamanism is discouraged by orthodox Islam but is widely practiced



Religion in Islamic Archaeology, Fig. 4 Pilgrims visiting the sixteenth-century tomb of Sultan Ali near Kunya Urgench, Turkmenistan