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ISLAMIC CITY, ARAB CITY: ORIENTALIST MYTHS AND RECENT VIEWS

André Raymond

1. *Orientalism and the Concept of the Muslim City**

The important contribution made to the subject by Stephen Humphreys in his *Islamic History* and his explicit reference to 'the great French tradition of Islamic urban studies'¹ fortunately exonerate me from any accusation of 'Franco-centricity' for my first remark—namely, that the classic concept of the Muslim city is very much a French affair. The first 'formal' exposés are to the credit of the French 'school of Algiers', developed by the Marçais brothers (1928, William Marçais, 'L'Islamisme et la vie urbaine') and extended into the 1930s and 1940s by the school of Damascus (Sauvaget and Weulersse).² Generally speaking, the problems of urban planning seem to have particularly interested French researchers, as is evidenced by the series of often remarkable monographs produced during the long French presence on the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores: from the *Marrakech* of Deverdun, the *Fès* of Le Tourneau and the *Alger* of Lespès to the *Alep* of Sauvaget. We owe the history of *Cairo*, although still under the commanding shadow of Lord Cromer, to Marcel Clerget.³ It was only later that Gustave von Grunebaum summed up the essentials of a 'doctrinal' development, in which Janet Abu Lughod mischievously highlighted the chain of successive authorities (*isnād*), from the works of the founding fathers.⁴ It will not be, therefore, through an excess of chauvinism that I will characterize the first constitution of this corpus by features that are strongly linked to French Orientalism and Orientalists.

1.1. The doctrine of the Orientalists concerning the Muslim city and Muslim town planning fits naturally into the fundamental concept of Orientalism, according to which any phenomenon arising in the civilization of a Muslim

* This is the text of the Annual BRISMES lecture given at SOAS, London in March 1994. It was translated into English by Ms Camilla Crumbeke.

¹ R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History*, Princeton, 1991, p.228.

² The basic exposés are to be found in: William Marçais, 'L'Islamisme et la vie urbaine', in *Articles et conférences*, Paris, 1961; Georges Marçais, 'L'urbanisme musulman', in *Mélanges d'histoire et d'archéologie de l'Occident musulman*, 2 vol., Algiers, 1957, v.1; 'La conception des villes dans l'Islam', *Revue d'Alger*, II, 1945; Roger Le Tourneau, *Cités musulmanes d'Afrique du Nord*, Algiers, 1957; Jean Sauvaget, 'Esquisse d'une histoire de la ville de Damas', *REI*, 4 (1934); *Alep, Essai sur le développement d'une grande ville syrienne*, Paris, 1951; Jacques Weulersse, 'Antioche, Essai de géographie urbaine', *BEO*, 4 (1934); *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient*, Paris, 1946.

³ Gaston Deverdun, *Marrakech des origines à 1912*, 2 vol., Rabat, 1959–1966. Roger Le Tourneau, *Fès avant le protectorat*, Casablanca, 1949. René Lespès, *Alger, étude de géographie et d'histoire urbaine*, Paris, 1930. Marcel Clerget, *Le Caire*, 2 vol., Cairo, 1934. Jean Sauvaget, *Alep . . .*, Paris, 1951.

⁴ Gustave von Grunebaum, 'The Structure of the Muslim Town' (1955), in *Islam*, London, 1961. Janet Abu Lughod, 'The Islamic City', *IJMES*, 19 (1987).

country is totally conditioned by Islam. Robert Ilbert wrote quite judiciously on this subject that 'it is because, at the beginning, most Orientalists posed ... the fundamental role of Islam in the structuring of urban space that it was again revealed at the end'.⁵ It is therefore not surprising to hear Islam naturally referred to regarding the institutions, the organization of political life, the social and economic activities and even the physical structure of the city that, in these conditions, one can only describe as 'Muslim'.

This aspect is so well known that it is quite superfluous to dwell any further on it. It would perhaps be more profitable to attempt to understand how the intellectual and political environment in which these theoreticians of the Muslim city lived (many of them French scholars, remember) coloured their representation of the object they studied. Let us note first of all that French colonization had spread in Algeria and Tunisia, then in the Levant, in regions which had been deeply marked by the Greek and Roman civilizations. The minds of the researchers would undoubtedly be drawn by the fascination of antique town planning, countless examples of which were spread before their eyes (from Timgad to Palmyra); this is nowhere more obvious than with Sauvaget: a great part of his work was devoted to highlighting the traces of antique town planning, still present in the modern organization of Arab cities (see his studies on Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia).⁶ This tendency was all the more natural as French colonization willingly represented itself as re-establishing Roman 'imperium', with which French civilization was establishing ties, so to say, after an 'interval' of some fifteen centuries. Ancient town planning, set off by prestigious monuments, in keeping with municipal regulations and institutions, and regularly developed physically, was an obvious model to follow: the return to an orthogonal layout, triumphing over the irregularity of Arab streets, was understood as a victory of civilization and progress over the anarchy that had characterized Arab urbanism. The comparison with Western medieval cities, and their urban institutions (the famous 'communes'), in which the blossoming of Europe was nurtured, while the Arab Orient was slowly sinking into its decline, must have been just as dangerous. Having found nothing in the theories of Weber on the evolution of Western cities that could be applied to the cities they had before them, the specialists, in particular Sauvaget in Syria, had to admit that they were dealing with a type of urban layout that could only be defined by a morose enumeration of all those elements it obviously lacked: the regularity and institutions of the antique city and the charts and communes of the medieval town.⁷

This moroseness would be all the more accentuated as (thanks to French conquest) the Arab cities they were studying had just emerged from a period of 'Turkish' domination, whose recent reverses and violence had blackened the whole span of its long history. One could put together an anthology

⁵ Robert Ilbert, 'La ville islamique: réalité et abstraction', *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale: Espaces et formes de l'Orient arabe*, 10/11 (avril 1982).

⁶ See his works, already mentioned, on Damascus and Aleppo, and 'Le plan de Laodicée-sur-Mér', *BEO*, 4 (1934).

⁷ I have been unable to trace the direct influence of Max Weber on the theories of J. Sauvaget and J. Weulersse.

of assessments contrasting the 'Turkish tyranny' with the age of order and progress announced by French domination, the heir to ancient civilization. I will limit myself to two significant quotations taken from books that are, on different accounts, monuments of erudition and perspicacity: under the Ottomans, writes Marcel Clerget, Cairo 'was slowly dying ... letting the remains of its glorious past crumble down little by little ... Cairo returned ... to the scattered settlements favoured by the first Arabs ... Art vanished with all the other manifestations of an ordered and intelligent life'. In Aleppo, noted Sauvaget (who could, nonetheless, recognize its Ottoman magnificence), the 'elements of disintegration ... once again exert their pressure, with a tendency to exaggeration that accelerates the disruption of the urban centre ... The Aleppo of the Ottomans is nothing but an illusion ('un trompe-oeil')—a sumptuous façade behind which there are only ruins'.⁸

1.2. The 'Syrian school' brought an additional element to this depressing picture. The studies conducted by Jacques Weulersse on Antioch and the Alawite cities of Northern Syria led him to define a city model that was profoundly split between hostile communities (here the Sunni Muslims, the Alawites, the Turks and the Christians)—a dislocated city, broken up into closed, inward-looking sectors, a conception which J. Sauvaget and J. Weulersse held strongly in common. See J. Sauvaget's remarks: 'the Muslim city is no longer considered as a single entity, existing in itself, complex and alive: now, it is just a gathering of individuals with conflicting interests'. Or again, this time about Aleppo: we owe to the Muslim period nothing but 'the dislocation of the urban centre, its fragmentation into small, distinct and even sometimes antinomical cells'.⁹ It would be logical to suppose that J. Weulersse, who arrived in Syria in 1932, found in Antioch the confirmation of Sauvaget's findings about Aleppo.

It is partly to J. Weulersse, who was greatly impressed by the spectacle of an Alawite city submerged in a foreign, and even hostile, Sunni rural environment, that we owe the concept of the Arab city as a parasitic body. There would be much to quote from the remarks of J. Weulersse on this Oriental city: 'In the Orient, the city appears as a foreign body "encysted" in the country like a creation imposed on the countryside it dominates and exploits'. A variety of reasons account for this phenomenon: historical reasons ('artificial settling by foreign masters'), a Syrian variation on the often repeated theme of the incapacity of the Arabs to govern themselves and their submitting to 'foreign' dynasties; demographic reasons (the urban populations have different origins: they 'are not, as in the West, fed by the surrounding rural population'. There is a 'specifically urban' population. It is to be noted that this theme was commonly used about Algiers with its population of *baldis* differing from the 'Algerian' population); ethnic and religious reasons (the towns accommodated communities that were different from those living in the surrounding countryside: Antioch is 'Turkish', in the middle of an Alawite and Arab region; Hama is 'Arab' in the middle of an Alawite and Bedouin

⁸ M. Clerget, *Le Caire*, I, 178–180. J. Sauvaget, *Alep*, 239.

⁹ J. Sauvaget, 'Esquisse', 455–56; *Alep*, 248.

region). (Note here this 'national' acceptance of a way of life, nomadism, which is characteristic of the manner in which French Orientalists generally analysed native society in North Africa). The city is 'without human roots in the country that supports it and on which it lives ... The city's inhabitants thus [appear] as a drifting population ... Their only link with the countryside being the desire to exploit it to the hilt ... The economic activities of the cities thus seem essentially parasitic ... The city ... consumes but does not produce'.¹⁰ This concept, it should be noted, has been prevalent in our studies for a very long time, and it is only quite recently that it underwent severe criticism from Albert Hourani who coined the expression 'agro-city'.¹¹

1.3. Such are some of the scientific, sociological and political presuppositions of the urban theory whose main proponents were William and George Marçais and Roger Le Tourneau in the Maghreb, and Jacques Weulersse and Jean Sauvaget in Syria. The essentials of the doctrine were the subject of a remarkable summary in the classic article by Gustave von Grunebaum, 'The Structure of the Muslim Town', published in 1955 (*Islam*, 1961, 141-158), but they are also to be found in many of the later publications that again took up the main Orientalist themes on this point.

I should first like to repeat that this conception of the city is fundamentally negative in its approach. The 'Muslim' city has lost the regularity of the antique city: it has replaced Graeco-Roman order (physically orthogonal) and organization with a structure based on no apparent logical principle. The streets are irregular and winding; even worse, they often end in a cul-de-sac. The Arab city, seen on a map, is a labyrinth and, for the visitor, a muddle in which he is led astray. The comments made by Roger Le Tourneau in his *Cités musulmanes d'Afrique du Nord* are absolutely typical: 'Nothing is more foreign to a Muslim town in the Maghreb than the rectilinear avenues of a Roman or a modern city [note the term 'Muslim town', and the comparison]: an aerial photograph of any Muslim city makes us think of a maze, or a labyrinth. Instead of being integrated into a planned design, the buildings have forced the communication routes to skirt round them, or to slip between them, as best they could. As a result, there are an extraordinary number of dead-ends and the roads are very rarely straight'.¹² G. Marçais wonders about the contradiction involved: 'Nonetheless, it is not because the Muslims, who content themselves with narrow streets, have not acknowledged the advantage of a straight line as the best route from one point to another', he concludes, leaving the reader to tackle this mystery of Arab mental structures.¹³ The monuments of the Muslim city give only a depreciated image of the beautiful urban ornamentation of antiquity: 'the souks, the qaisariya, the khan ... are but a degeneration of avenues with colonnades, of the basilica, of the agora'.¹⁴

¹⁰ J. Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie*, 86-88.

¹¹ Albert Hourani, 'The Islamic City', in *The Islamic City*, A.H. Hourani and S. Stern (edd.), Oxford, 1970. See also my remarks on the subject: 'Les rapports villes-campagnes', in *Terroirs et Sociétés*, B. Cannon (ed.), Lyon, 1987.

¹² R. Le Tourneau, *Cités musulmanes*, 20.

¹³ G. Marçais, 'L'urbanisme musulman', 227.

¹⁴ J. Sauvaget, *Alep*, 247.

Sauvaget brilliantly demonstrates how the antique avenue with its columns was transformed (or, should one say, degraded) and became the *sūq*.

The 'Muslim' city was not equipped with those communal institutions that ensured the development of the medieval city. It was not administered. No wonder! 'The status of the cities,' wrote J. Sauvaget, in his famous article on Damascus, 'is subject to no particular provision in Islamic law. There are *no more* municipal institutions . . . The city is *no longer* considered as an entity, as a being in itself, complex and alive: it is just a gathering of individuals with conflicting interests who, each in his own sphere, acts on his own account'.¹⁵ The city is no more than a non-city, Muslim town-planning no planning at all. The Muslim era, Sauvaget was to conclude energetically in his *Alep*, 'is unaccompanied by any positive contribution . . . the only thing we can credit it with is the dislocation of the urban centre . . . The work of Islam is essentially negative'; the town has become 'an inconsistent and inorganic assembly of quarters'; it is as if it were 'the negation of urban order'.¹⁶

It is of course difficult to go any further than this and one is therefore not too surprised that in their description of a 'non-city', essentially characterized by *what it is not*, the Orientalist exegetes were rather short of positive elements. Chiefly struck by the surrounding anarchy and disorder, dismayed by an apparent disdain for straight lines and ninety-degree angles that offended not only their reason and taste but perhaps their moral standards, they noted the fact, which seems self-evident, that the city, inhabited by a totally or predominantly Muslim population, accommodated Muslim institutions (*hisba*, the justice of the *qādī*) and included at least one mosque, not surprisingly located in a central position (just like the cathedral in the medieval town that Western scholars did not, however, call 'Christian'). Besides the mosque-cathedral, used for collective prayer, the city had a highly centred market that was usually connected to the mosque and organized according to strictly specialized activities in the frame of the trade guilds, with a clear-cut separation between the residential and non-residential quarters. The reference to walls surrounding the city and provided with gates, and the observation that many cities had a palace—often in the form of a citadel—in which the prince resided, seem to emerge from otherwise quite commonplace descriptions of North African cities in the case of the brothers Marçais and R. Le Tourneau. One can say the same of their remarks concerning water supplies, the *ḥammām* (in particular from the viewpoint of its role in the fulfilment of religious duties), and eventually the removal of garbage.

Let us note also that this city is described as timeless, or rather that changes of epochs did not seem to affect its organization in any way: L. Massignon, in fact, set up as a dogma the immutability of the markets around the mosque from the city's origins up to French colonization. In any case, the Orientalists evidently considered that the city they had before their eyes, that had been produced by the last centuries of its evolution, was definitely the same as the city they analysed from texts of the classical era. George Marçais (in 'L'urbanisme musulman') refers, on page after page, to the Fustat of the

¹⁵ J. Sauvaget, 'Esquisse', 455-56.

¹⁶ J. Sauvaget, *Alep*, 247-48.

tenth century, to the Fez of the Marinid sultans of the fourteenth century and to the Algiers of the Turkish *deys*, in order to define a city that is above all North African, while resorting, with no compunction, to an analysis of the sociological behaviour of the Muslims which is also considered as *ne varietur*.

The house (inevitably a 'Muslim' house) is also timeless. So as to preserve family privacy (considered as a preoccupation mainly linked to Islamic religious dictates), the house is turned inwards, its blind walls remaining blank to any socio-economic investigation. The central courtyard does not only fulfil a social function, it is also symbolic and has a religious value. G. Marçais wrote on the subject in 1940: 'the house is aired and lit by its inner courtyard, whose piece of sky belongs to it alone'.¹⁷ Half a century later, a Lebanese historian echoes the statement in stronger terms: Antoine Abdel Nour ascribes a metaphysical value to this courtyard: the 'celestial' courtyard (as our texts put it so well)—[a rather extreme translation of *samāwī*, 'open-air']—is thus able to communicate not only with other human beings, but with the universe'.¹⁸

This remarkable coincidence between the Orientalist and the Oriental draws our attention to a last point that seems noteworthy. The Orientalist concept of the Muslim city and Muslim house was generally adopted by Arab and Muslim researchers who, after the Westerners, looked into these problems. They ignored the fact that the highly stressed 'Islamic' character of the city and housing originated, for the French Orientalists, from a local tendency to define as 'Muslim' any feature particular to the Arab population of the territories in which French colonial domination was established: we must not forget that, in the official terminology of Algeria before 1960, the natives were termed 'Muslims' following a religious reference, and not 'Algerians', as would have been logical, since the 'colonists' called themselves Europeans (and, of course, not Christians). One can understand why the Arab epigones of these theoreticians adopted a view that highlighted the uniqueness of their civilization, and enhanced the feature through which their identity could best be asserted and preserved during political ordeals (colonization in particular)—that is to say, religion. One is more surprised that they did not more vigorously criticize the highly disparaging considerations that accompanied this acknowledgement of Islam. This is a quite remarkable feature of 'colonial' acculturation.

2. *The End of Orientalism: the City Reconsidered*

2.1. I believe that a date can be given for the end of classical Orientalism in our studies: 1957, i.e. the publication date of the second volume of the masterly work of H.A.R. Gibb and H. Bowen, which I should describe (with admiration) as the last great endeavour of European Orientalism.¹⁹ The project (an ambitious overall picture of 'Islamic' society) could not be completed in view of the progress of research at that time. The title itself (*Islamic Society and the West*) underlines the main weakness of the enterprise (its Eurocentrism),

¹⁷ G. Marçais, 'L'urbanisme musulman', 227.

¹⁸ Antoine Abdel Nour, 'Types architecturaux et vocabulaire de l'habitat en Syrie', in *L'espace social de la ville arabe*, D. Chevallier (ed.), Paris, 1979, 83.

¹⁹ H.A.R. Gibb and H. Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*, 2 vol., Oxford, 1950-1957.

and explains its inevitable failure. The series of works scheduled to follow this 'introduction' was never to be. It also seems to me very significant that von Grunebaum's article, the epitome of the Orientalist conception of the city, is dated precisely 1955, and was thus to be its swan-song. As early as the 1960s, the postulates of Orientalism were to be called into question one after another under the effect of factors that I will now try to summarize.

2.2. One cannot overemphasize the importance of the role played by the arrival of researchers trained in varied disciplines, and with a double specialization, in a field which, until then, had been dominated by scholars expert in Oriental languages and Islam, and occupying varied domains of research for which they had no specific preparation. The pioneering role of Ira Lapidus must be underlined here. His *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*²⁰ has helped highlight the 'historical' character of the city. In France, Claude Cahen, an historian interested in economic issues, influenced a whole generation of historians who became specialists in the history of the Arab countries in which they used their disciplinary expertise.

Just as weighty in fruitful consequences for the extension of urban research (now open to much confrontation and comparison), was the arrival in this field of geographers such as Eugen Wirth in Germany, who brought with them an interest in the study of space, as one of the variables involved, and an aptitude for its translation into maps—a domain in which the old studies were generally deficient, with the notable exception of J. Sauvaget. The contribution of the sociologists and the anthropologists has also been decisive in understanding social problems, as it was naturally useful to compare them with those posed by the study of any city or society, Islamic or not. Clifford Geertz and others helped to relocate our field in the wider framework of the great disciplines of the social sciences, and make it benefit from their progress and the possibility of fruitful parallels—with the risk, of course, of contamination of our work by trends of uncertain duration arising around new gurus, often on this side of the Atlantic. At least our research has ceased to be an island, a domain reserved only for specialists in Oriental languages and studies.²¹

2.3. I would attribute the same importance to the development of studies on the Ottoman period, that is to say the four centuries that have elapsed since 1516, with the huge amount of documentation accumulated and preserved by the administrations of the Empire's Arab provinces. Stephen Humphreys, in his *Islamic History*, has put much stress on this still relatively recent rediscovery—quite rightly, in my opinion.²² In this domain, we naturally owe a great deal to the progress made by the Turkish school led by Omer Lutfi Barkan with his first studies on the tax system and demography, extensively based on Ottoman archive documents, at the end of the 1930s. The massive use of these extraordinarily varied documents (judges' registers, tax

²⁰ Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the later Middle Ages*, Harvard U.P., 1967.

²¹ Eugen Wirth, 'Zum Problem des Bazars', *Islam*, 51 (1974); 'Die orientalische Stadt', *Saeculum*, 26 (1975). Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago, 1971.

²² S. Humphreys, *Islamic History*, 231.

documents, central political archives, *waqf* acts), and their inexhaustible abundance (thousands of registers and millions of documents), have transformed the picture researchers had, until the end of the 1950s, of the Arab cities of the Empire in a territory extending from the frontiers of Morocco to those of Iran.

2.3.1. Generally speaking, this documentation called into question the conception of generalized Ottoman decadence, a postulate which was one of the bases of the very negative views of the scholars of the Algiers and Damascus schools on the Arab city, received by colonization from the so-called obscurantist and brutal Turkish domination.

2.3.2. The examination of the Tribunal registers revealed, in particular, the considerable role played by the *qādīs* in the management of the city and somewhat attenuated the Orientalist concept of 'non-administration', thus confirming the elements treated by R. Brunschvig in his study on medieval urbanism and Muslim law.²³ New consideration was given to the importance of institutions whose existence was known, but whose activities had been underestimated—the trade guilds in the economic centre of the city, the communities of the quarters (*ḥawma*, *ḥāra*, *maḥalla*) in the residential areas, and the communities of religious or ethnic character. The variety of these communities and their activities brought useful corrective elements to the thesis that Sauvaget had developed concerning Damascus and Aleppo, of a non-administered city left to the self-interest of individuals and therefore doomed to anarchy.

2.4. On several essential points the Orientalist analysis was strongly challenged and criticized; the reflection of J. Abu Lughod in *IJMES* is a good example of this kind of devastating exposé.²⁴

2.4.1. The possibility opened up by the Ottoman documents of an in-depth and detailed study of urban society, and its interpretation in figures, called into question one of the foundations of the Orientalist vision, that of the egalitarianism of Muslim society, considered as the mere reproduction of the religious *umma*. The figures given in my *Artisans et Commerçants* on the highly unequal nature of 'traditional' Cairo Muslim society were confirmed recently by research conducted on Damascus by Colette Establet and Jean-Paul Pascual, as well as by the work being carried out by Tal Shuval for Algiers.²⁵ The manner of envisaging the structure of the city, or the problem of 'traditional' housing, was, under these conditions, profoundly altered. I shall return to this point later.

²³ Robert Brunschvig, 'Urbanisme médiéval et droit musulman', *Islamica*, 1947.

²⁴ Janet Abu Lughod, 'The Islamic City—Historic myth, Islamic essence, and contemporary relevance', *IJMES*, 19 (1987).

²⁵ André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIème siècle*, 2 vol., Damascus, 1974, II, 375. Colette Establet et Jean-Paul Pascual, *Familles et fortunes à Damas*, Institut Français de Damas, in press. C. Establet, J.-P. Pascual, A. Raymond, 'Le mesure de l'inégalité dans la société ottomane', *JESHO*, in press. Tal Shuval, *Alger au XVIIIème siècle*, in progress.

2.4.2. One of the bases of the Orientalist theory, the disparaging comparison with the city of classical antiquity which contributed so much to depreciate the image we had of the Muslim city—the degenerate heir of a glorious past—somewhat collapsed under the effect of the scientific work of the specialists (historians and archeologists) of the Late Roman Empire (the Byzantine period), for example in Apamea (J. Ch. Balty).²⁶ The discovery of a gradual degradation of the ancient order is not recent: apparently conscious of this evolution, and as though smitten with last-minute remorse, Sauvaget noted (in the penultimate page of his *Alep*) that the reduction of the frame of urban life to more rudimentary forms (observed in the Muslim era) had begun under the Byzantines, but he did not go any further towards the logical conclusion this remark obviously entailed. In a more explicit manner, Cl. Cahen suggested, as early as 1958, that one should avoid considering pre-Islamic urban history ‘through traditional images of an impeccable antique city . . . The city inherited by Islam is no longer an antique city’. The theme was convincingly taken up again, notably by S.M. Stern (‘The Constitution of the Islamic City’) and more recently, by Hugh Kennedy in his authoritative article ‘From *Polis* to *Madina*’, in which he notes that, in the urban communities of the fifth and sixth centuries in Syria, ‘there was no classical town plan to affect later growth . . . The ‘streets’ were narrow winding paths, there was no agora, no colonnades, no theatre’.²⁷ Many of the (negative) aspects that the Orientalists thought characteristic of the Islamic city were therefore apparent in the ‘antique’ city that had preceded, and resulted from, an urban evolution that spread over three centuries.

2.4.3. The research conducted by Baber Johansen in Germany,²⁸ allowed the necessary rectifications to be made to yet another fundamental point of the Orientalist exegesis, strongly underlined by Sauvaget: the so-called silence of Muslim law on the subject of the city. The *fuqahā*’ (Hanafite in the case of Johansen’s research) were thus capable of conceiving the existence of a city as distinct from the countryside, a point which seems obvious but left Sauvaget in doubt. They were even able to describe some of its essential structures, such as the division between public quarters and private quarters which entailed major consequences in the application of Muslim law (the problem of the *qasāma*). As regards this point, the study of the archives of the *qādī* of the Ottoman era has confirmed the ‘medieval’ research of Brunschvig and proved the existence of an implicit doctrine on which were based the decisions taken, day by day, by the *‘ulamā*’.

²⁶ Janine et Jean Ch. Balty, ‘Le cadre topographique et historique’, in *Colloque Apamée de Syrie*, Janine Balty (ed.), Brussels, 1969. On this subject see the papers presented at the conference *La Syrie de Byzance à l’Islam*, P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais (edd.), Damascus, 1992.

²⁷ J. Sauvaget, *Alep*, 248. Claude Cahen, ‘Mouvements populaires et autonomisme urbain’, *Arabica*, 5 (1958), 226. Samuel M. Stern, ‘The Constitution of the Islamic City’, in *The Islamic City*, A.H. Hourani and S. Stern (edd.), Oxford, 1970. Hugh Kennedy, ‘From *Polis* to *Madina*’, *Past and Present*, 106 (1985), 13–14.

²⁸ Baber Johansen, ‘The claims of men and the claims of God’, in *Pluriformiteit en vardeling*, Nijmegen, 1980; ‘The all-embracing town and its mosques’, *ROMM*, 32 (1981).

2.4.4. Finally, the preposterous nature of some of the basic presuppositions of Orientalism was progressively brought out into full light. How can one speak of an Islamic city by only considering Mediterranean Arab cities (and sometimes cities of the Maghreb) and ignoring the remaining five-sixths of the Islamic world? Oleg Grabar noted the absurdity of using a concept such as that of Islam to account for urban phenomena of countries with such varied historical and cultural traditions, and different climatic conditions, as those of a Muslim world that spreads from Morocco to China, from Central Asia to Black Africa.²⁹ The development of research carried out on the foundation periods (Kubiak for Fustat; Hichem Djaït for Kufa); in the classical periods (Lapidus, J.-Cl. Garcin), and in the modern period (A. Raymond), justifies the query of J.-Cl. Garcin: the evolution of Muslim society during a period that spread over twelve centuries makes 'a *ne varietur* interpretation' of the 'Muslim city' and the 'Muslim house' very difficult.³⁰ Contrary to what was suggested by the Orientalists, for whom the 'traditional' city they had before their eyes (then still almost intact) and the medieval city were two aspects of the same reality, the classical city has to be *reconstructed*, as the fundamental features of the urban structure have naturally evolved from the time of their foundation to the classical and to the modern periods.

2.5. All these data explain why the criticism of the traditional concept of the 'Muslim' city was so radical. After having reviewed the supposed characteristics of the 'Islamic' city, Eugen Wirth successively eliminated the irregular street network and the dead end (to be found in the ancient Orient), the house with a central courtyard (also present in antiquity and a common feature all around the Mediterranean, Muslim and Christian), and the division of the city into quarters; he concludes 'that the "souk", the central business area, is probably the only and fundamental distinctive criterion for the Near Eastern city which can be considered as Islamic cultural heritage'. And the suggestion of E. Wirth is 'to renounce the term "Islamic city" and to prefer the more general "Oriental city" . . . Islam seems to be more the inhabitant or occupant of Middle Eastern urban systems than the architect'.³¹ It remains to be seen if, beyond so radical a revisionism, some characteristics of a 'traditional city' can nevertheless be defined on this *tabula rasa*.

3. Characteristics of the 'Traditional' City

3.1. The fundamental feature of the structure of the 'traditional' Arab city³² is the very clearly marked separation of its economic activities and its residential functions. In the great Arab cities that we know, the main economic

²⁹ Oleg Grabar, 'Reflections on the study of Islamic Art', *Muqarnas*, 1 (1983), 8.

³⁰ Wladyslaw Kubiak, *Al-Fustat*, Cairo, 1987. Hichem Djaït, *Al-Kûfa, naissance de la ville islamique*, Paris, 1986. I. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*. Jean-Claude Garcin, 'Habitat médiéval et histoire urbaine', in *Palais et Maisons du Caire, I—Epoque mamlouke*, Paris, 1982, quotation p.216. André Raymond, *Grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane*, Paris, 1985.

³¹ Eugen Wirth, 'The Middle Eastern City: Islamic City? Oriental City? Arabian City', Lecture given at Harvard University, 1982, 9.

³² I have developed these themes in *The great Arab Cities in the 16th-18th centuries*, New York, 1984 and in *Grandes villes arabes*.

centres (specialized markets, working on products that are the object of international trade: spices; cloth; caravanserai devoted to wholesale trade) occupy the centre of the city. This feature, however, is also to be found in Irano-Afghan cities. This is such an outstanding phenomenon that E. Wirth, as we have just seen, has made this 'market' the most certain characteristic of the 'Oriental' city, if not the only one.

The central area of the markets is strongly linked to the main mosque, as Louis Massignon pointed out in his first studies of Moroccan and Iraqi cities, which does not exclude profound modifications in the geography of these activities according to the evolution of the economy. There are a great number of public monuments (mosques, educational establishments/*madrasas*) in this 'public' area of the city, whose individuality is so strong that it is often expressed in the toponymy: in Cairo it is the ancient Fatimid foundation of 'Qāhira'; in Aleppo, it is the 'Mdineh' (= *madīna*), 'the City'. The specificity of the central area thus appears in its activities, focused on trade, religion and education. It can be read on the maps with its network of relatively large and straight streets leading directly to the gates (see the main street of Aleppo, of antique origin, or the 'Qaṣaba' in Cairo, which was laid out by the Fatimid conquerors in AD 969). It is also expressed in works of jurisprudence by the concept of a 'public' space, as Baber Johansen's research clearly demonstrated.

Around this centre there spreads an area devoted above all to residential housing, in which economic activities only appear in the form of local, non-specialized markets (the *suwayqa*) that were so brilliantly analysed by J. Sauvaget.³³ On the maps this area stands out by the more irregular layout of its streets, which often end in blind alleys, and by the existence of practically closed quarters that only open in the direction of the central regions where the population goes to work or to purchase products not in everyday use; examples of this arrangement can be found in certain Oriental cities of antiquity. It is to be noted that this network of irregular streets, which was sometimes wrongly taken to be a characteristic of the whole 'Arab' city, was in fact just one part of the street network: in Algiers, Cairo and Aleppo, these dead ends represented only a little less than half of the total length of the streets, and they were predominant only in the non-central parts of these cities.

This general structure of the city determined a radio-concentric distribution of both its economic activities and residential areas. The spacing of the various trades from the centre to the outskirts, following a rather strict classification (the richer and the more specialized trades in the centre, the poorer and the more space-consuming or polluting on the outskirts of the city), is a well-known phenomenon, and is moreover an experiential fact in what remains of the traditional cities. History also shows that when the expansion of the city absorbed 'peripheral' activities, a relocation near the city limits

³³ See Jean Sauvaget, 'Décrets Mamelouks de Syrie, I', *BEO*, 2 (1932), 29-30; 'Esquisse', 452-53; *Alep*, 105.

could occur: this was the case with the tanneries in Aleppo, in Cairo and in Tunis during the Ottoman era.³⁴

The reality of such spacing as regards residential housing frequently provokes objections that are chiefly based on 'Orientalist' presuppositions: the concept of an *umma* whose egalitarian nature would be transposed to the social behaviour of the faithful regarding their homes—the 'unitary' character of which would be strongly marked; the idea that traditional society was characterized rather by the harmony of its socio-economic conditions than by a separation into categories (indeed, even 'classes') with contrasting characteristics. The research carried out in Cairo, and more recently in Damascus and in Algiers, shows that, on the contrary, 'traditional' society was characterized by its very pronounced inequality: in Cairo, at the end of the eighteenth century, 3% of the individuals studied shared 50.1% of the cumulated property and 50% possessed only 4.3%. Gini's index—which provides a convenient evaluation of this social inequality—gives values indicating great disparities: 0.74 around 1700 in Cairo and Damascus, even more in Algiers.³⁵

It is therefore not surprising that such an inequality was expressed spatially by the formation of 'rich' housing areas in the central regions, moderate housing in the intermediate regions, and poor housing on the outskirts. This layout of successive rings was demonstrated for Cairo by Nelly Hanna.³⁶ It could probably also be deduced from the studies conducted by A. Marcus and J.-Cl. David on Aleppo or those of J. Revault on Tunis.³⁷ Although many authors hesitate to accept this fact, it hardly seems questionable, it being understood of course that no area has a totally homogeneous character (which leaves a place for those observations dear to the Orientalists, and to the Orientals, on the proximity of rich and poor in the Muslim city); it being also understood that a great many factors prevent a perfect geographical realization of such a layout: for instance, the existence of quarters inhabited by the ruling caste (often on the outskirts), or the constitution of community quarters that obey an entirely different logic. Anyway, it should be noted that such an arrangement was described long ago by G. Sjoberg for pre-industrial cities in general.³⁸

3.2. Just as important are segregative factors whose appearance many medieval historians tend to place during the Ottoman period, although the Ottoman domination no doubt only accentuated phenomena that existed well before the beginning of the sixteenth century in the Arab countries later incorporated into the Ottoman empire. But here again, the old myths on the homogeneity of the social body die hard. Nevertheless, the omnipresence

³⁴ André Raymond, 'Le déplacement des tanneries à Alep, au Caire et à Tunis', *REMMM*, 55-56, (1990).

³⁵ See the studies mentioned in footnote 25.

³⁶ Nelly Hanna, *Habiter au Caire aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles*, Cairo, 1991.

³⁷ Jean-Claude David, 'Dégradation et tentatives actuelles de réadaptation', *BEO*, 28 (1975). Abraham Marcus, *Aleppo in the eighteenth century*, Columbia, 1989. J. Renault, *Palais et Maisons de Tunis*, Paris, 4 vol., 1967-1978.

³⁸ Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City*, New York, 1965.

of these divisions is quite obviously one of the most striking features of the Arab-Muslim city.

We have just seen how the very marked inequality which characterized traditional Muslim society resulted in a splitting of the housing areas which, without being absolute, formed very heterogeneous sectors in the city. The existence of relatively closed residential quarters also contributed to reinforcing this heterogeneity; although the quarters took on a certain diversity, just like the housing 'zones', they appear to have developed above all in moderate or poor housing areas, and they therefore contributed to a certain compartmentalization of the city.

These segregative factors were particularly marked in the case of the numerous religious and ethnic communities whose variety was one of the characteristics of the Arab city. It can be estimated that one-fifth of the population of Cairo during the eighteenth century belonged to an ethnic community (Turks, Syrians, North Africans) or to a religious community (local Coptic Christians, Christians of Syrian origin and Jews). The figure is even higher for a city like Algiers (Andalusians, Turks, Berbers . . .). If the ethnic minorities were unequally grouped together according to the extent of their 'differences' (the Turks and the Kurds had a stronger tendency to stay together than the non-native Arabs), the religious communities (the people of the Book, or *dhimmi*s) were usually subject to fairly strict segregation. There existed of course Christian or Jewish quarters, even if their development did not generally originate from a political decision: the apparent exceptions of constitution of the Jewish quarter in Sana'a at the end of the seventeenth century or of the Moroccan 'mellahs' at the beginning of the nineteenth century should be noted, but it is unlikely that the Jews were not already more or less grouped together in these two cities. This again does not preclude some cohabitation of Muslims and Christians. But from this point of view, the evolution of the Christian quarter in Aleppo, from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, seems exemplary: the progressive extension of the community towards the East, resulting from its considerable growth during these four centuries, clearly shows the limits of this mixing; the consequence of the Christians' advance was obviously that the Muslims abandoned their 'conquered' quarters.³⁹ This is a phenomenon that can be compared to the 'blackening' of areas in some of today's large American cities: in both cases, the 'stronger' community withdraws so as to avoid any contact with the weaker community—with the difference however that the Christians of Aleppo were an economically more prosperous community than the Muslims they were pushing back by their expansion. The tendency of the Ottomans to let 'natural' communities govern themselves, for reasons of convenience, may have accentuated what is an apparently very ancient phenomenon. Antioch, as we have seen earlier, presents an extreme picture of this religious (Alawite, Christian) and ethnic (Turkish) segregation

³⁹ André Raymond, 'Groupes sociaux et géographie urbaine à Alep', in *The Syrian Land*, T. Philipp (ed.), Stuttgart, 1992.

of communities.⁴⁰ But this fragmentation of the city was in no way conducive to anarchy, as the communities (*ṭā'ifa/tawā'if*) were associated with the administration of the city through their natural heads (*shaykhs*).

3.3. Contrary to the Orientalist postulates, the single type of housing in the form of the house with courtyard appears as a myth, but it is so deeply rooted and so often mentioned that it will have to be discussed once again. On the one hand, even in the framework of the house with courtyard, socio-economic differences constitute an essential variable that precludes its being considered as a unique model. There is a world of difference (and all the misery of the world) between a near-palace in the centre of the city (with numerous and specialized rooms, one or two floors, luxury fittings) and the elementary courtyard-house, nearly a rural house, on the city outskirts, even if both houses are arranged around a courtyard. The difference is visible from outside, contrary to the illusions of Orientalists. On the other hand, the Arab world possesses a large spectrum of types of housing, whose variety corresponds to both socio-economic differences and regional specificity. We can mention, as regards the latter aspect, the tower-house so well illustrated by houses around the Red Sea (Rosetta, the Yemen). Above all, however, the range of types of housing, corresponding to the needs of socially highly varied populations, is very rich: collective housing of *funduq* type (very widespread) and of *rab'* type (in Egypt only), designed for the middle classes; 'middle' housing without a courtyard described very convincingly by N. Hanna for Cairo;⁴¹ poor community housing of a rural character, of *ḥawsh* type (elementary houses grouped around a courtyard) attested in Egypt, Syria and in the Hijaz;⁴² poor unicellular houses whose existence in the Fatimid Fustat was recently revealed by the Scanlon and Kubiak excavations.⁴³ One must, therefore, refute very strongly the theory of a single type of housing based, on the one hand, on an egalitarian conception of Muslim society and, on the other, on the hypothesis of the preponderant role played in this particular society by the notion of 'privacy' (so important around the Mediterranean, Muslim or not).

4. Conclusions

Whatever the uncertainties that remain, or gaps in our information, it seems that one cannot speak of an 'Islamic' city such as the one the Orientalists thought they could define. The characteristics mentioned have nothing Islamic about them or are not relevant. Moreover, the often renewed efforts to define an urban 'doctrine' from the fundamental texts of Islam have generally proved disappointing. Besim Selim Hakim, in one of the more recent attempts of this kind (*Arabic-Islamic Cities*, London, 1986), indulged in an

⁴⁰ J. Weulersse, 'Antioche, essai de géographie urbaine'.

⁴¹ Nelly Hanna, 'Bayt al-Istambulli, an Introduction to the Cairene Middle Class House', *Annales Islamologiques*, 16 (1980).

⁴² A. Raymond, *Grandes villes arabes*, 323-25.

⁴³ W. Kubiak and G. Scanlon, final report on *Fustât C*, published in 1989.

exhaustive collection of quotations from the Qur'an and *ḥadīth*.⁴⁴ All he gathered, however, was a compendium of general dictates, essentially concerning the protection of privacy, or the constraints of neighbourhood life. The only truly significant text is the well-known Muslim *ḥadīth*: 'If you disagree about the width of a street, make it seven cubits'. A 'Muslim' doctrine in this domain can only be properly established on the basis of the collections of judicial decisions (such as the *nawāzil*) or of the transactions of the Tribunals (*maḥkama*) which reflect the practice of the judges and the *muftīs*, exercised of course in the framework of the *sharī'a*, but belonging quite obviously to the domain of the *qānūn*.

Does this mean that one can solve the problem thus posed by merely resorting to a geographical and cultural criterion, and by conjuring up a 'Mediterranean' Arab city, or, to be on the safe side, a 'Mediterranean Arabo-Islamic' city? This would mean ignoring the reality of a vast domain, stretching from the Ocean to the Indus, in which indisputable common characteristics could be found: concentration of market areas in the heart of the city; existence of closed quarters (*maḥalla*); importance of segregation and exclusion factors; predominance of houses with central courtyards. Even if these elements are not really 'Muslim', they do show an identity of organization that is definitely present from Marrakesh to Herat. It is also true that it is not easy to demonstrate the specificity of an Arab city, an Irano-Afghan city or even a Turkish city.

In this vast, 'Muslim', domain we are certainly faced with an urban system whose reality reveals the great weakness of the Orientalist description: its conclusion, explicit or not, of so-called 'urban anarchy', is quite obviously devoid of any meaning, since a city, that is to say a geographical concentration of a large population, can only subsist or develop within a system of coherent relations between its society and the space in which it expands. It is true, however, that the precise characteristics and possible originality of such a system cannot be easily defined at this stage of research, insofar as our present knowledge does not allow us, in particular, to account for its origins and formation.

To go further, first of all the *Arab* antecedents of the 'Arabo-Muslim' city would have to be made clear. The excavations in progress in the Yemen (and, in particular, those of Shabwa, organized by Jean-François Breton) have provided a wealth of suggestions and enabled us to relate the urban layout of an ancient, third-century town, such as that of Shabwa, to the modern cities of Shibam and Sana'a.⁴⁵ These excavations, however, seem to exclude the centrality of the market and result in a concept of the housing layout that is, all in all, random ('aléatoire'), which contradicts all we know of classical and modern town planning in the great Arab cities. The excavations at Fau in Saudi Arabia by al-Ansary would be of precious help if they continued with an investigation of the residential quarters in their relationship with the public

⁴⁴ Besim Selim Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, London, 1986, 146.

⁴⁵ J.F. Breton and Ch. Darles, 'Shibam', *Storia della Città*, 14 (1980). J.-F. Breton, 'Le site et la ville de Shabwa', *Syria*, 68 (1991). Ch. Darles, 'L'architecture civile à Shabwa', *Syria*, 68 (1991).

structures (temples) and business establishments (caravanserais? and *sūqs*?) that have been revealed.⁴⁶ We have not yet reached that stage.

The connections between the Arab cities and the Mediterranean cities of antiquity would also have to be better defined historically. In this case it is undoubtedly in Syria that a possible answer to the problem is to be found. The discovery in 1984 of the market of Palmyra set up in the antique roadway may provide us with the *missing link* in the transformation from a Roman avenue lined with columns to an Arab *sūq*, of which J. Sauvaget had an intuition sixty years ago. Its date, however, remains conjectural.⁴⁷

Finally, excavations would have to shed some light on the first large-scale Arab establishments in Kufa (AD 638) and Fustat (AD 642). No doubt we shall have to resign ourselves to the fact that the obstacles to any such venture will be insurmountable for a long time yet. The indications given by R.P. Gayraud concern a marginal site outside Fustat, in a limited area of a few hundred square metres which makes difficult a conclusion about the foundation of the city.⁴⁸

The ground is thus far from being cleared, and nothing shows that it will be in the near future. For the time being, it is wise to resort to the notion of a traditional city marked by 'regional' aspects (Arab in the Mediterranean domain, Irano-Afghan and Turkish), but naturally fashioned in depth by the Muslim population that organized it and lived in it (with its beliefs, institutions, and customs, all profoundly impregnated with Islam): it is the most prudent approach we can suggest, one which best takes into account the elements we have now at our disposal.

⁴⁶ A.R. al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Fau. A portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilization in Saudi Arabia*, London, 1981.

⁴⁷ Khālid As'ad, 'Iktishāf sūq min al-'ahd al-umawī fī Tadmur', *Annales Archéologiques Arabes Syriennes*, 37-38 (1991).

⁴⁸ Roland-Pierre Gayraud, 'Istabl 'Antar, 1987-1989', *Annales Islamologiques*, 25 (1991).