

**The Holy City of Medina:
Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia**

Harry Munt

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In *The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia*, Harry Munt offers a much-needed look at the history of Madinah through scholars' writing about its significance and the construction of its sanctity. By examining the city's history through a spatial lens, Munt presents a new perspective on

the history of a city that has been written about for more than a millennium. While Madinah has served as a catalyst of religious formation, identity, and practice, until now it has not been studied as a sanctified city (*ḥaram*) in and of itself.

As the city that welcomed Makkah's Muslim refugees, Madinah has a rich and complicated history. In addition, it is a sacred city. While modern Muslims primarily view it as sacred because of the presence of the Prophet's grave, the author returns to early Islamic sources to understand how early Muslim scholars between the seventh to the ninth centuries viewed the city and how it became sanctified. He argues against the modern normative Islamic viewpoint that the city was immediately viewed as sacred and posits that it took several centuries for the normative viewpoint to consolidate into a popular narrative.

Chapter 1 explores the challenge of understanding how scholars sanctified spaces in the Hejaz for both religious and also more mundane political purposes. Chapter 2 looks at records from the Prophet's life and why he sanctified his mosque in Madinah according to the appropriate pre-Islamic traditions. Chapter 3 delves into how early Muslim scholars further advanced the concept of the *ḥaram* as a sacred space, especially as the Muslim army quickly gained control of land throughout the Middle East. Confronted with communities that had differing religious and political practices, scholars had to adapt their understanding of the sacred according to their environment, which even led some to reconsider the significance of the city's *ḥaram*.

Drawing upon local histories and events recorded about the caliphs, chapter 4 considers how the city was sanctified by establishing structures around it to commemorate various events of the Prophet's life. In chapter 5 he asks "why Muslims from across the territory of the caliphate started to undertake pilgrimages to Medina" (p. 3). He struggles to find a clear answer due to the vagueness of the extant sources on this topic. Chapter 6 explains why and how both the caliphs and the scholars invested so much effort in this process to legitimize their own positions of religious and political authority as heirs to the Prophet.

Munt argues that Madinah did not become a sacred city overnight and that its status constantly fluctuated based on varying circumstances. The city did not become sanctified only because of its association with the Prophet, but also because of the actions and claims of the caliphs and religious scholars to his religious and political authority, which strengthened its sanctity. One of the main genres that the author draws upon is local histories, which are histo-

ries of regions and cities written by scholars both from Madinah and elsewhere. The very language and forms of expression they use to discuss the city are replete with meaning, and Munt uses these sources to analyze their conception of the city as sanctified.

Trained as a historian, Munt manages to engage this topic from a multidisciplinary approach. The study of sacred space has been emerging over the past twenty years as a specific methodological approach in its own right, one that has been adopted by scholars in many disciplines. Among those scholars working in the field of Islamic studies, the approach of studying the significance of sacred and secular spaces is still developing. Munt's monograph is a welcome addition that sheds light on one of the most important cities in the Islamicate world. Scattered throughout the book, he gives a nod to anthropologists, sociologists, and historians of religion who have been studying sacred space as a concept for several decades. His brush with theory (*viz.*, often that of works written more than 30 years ago by Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, and Victor Turner) in brief sections of his book, as well as in references in footnotes, leaves those familiar with this approach frustrated with his deeper lack of engagement.

Munt ultimately defines space as sacred "if it is clearly distinguished from other spaces, through defined boundaries and/or particular regulations and rites, and it is held to have a special connection with God/the divine" (p. 5). He primarily attributes Madinah's sanctification to the patronage of the caliphs as well as the claims and writings of religious scholars. One of his main theoretical interlocutors in this regard is Maurice Halbwachs (d. 1945), a French sociologist and philosopher who argued that sacred space is created through a constant process rather than at a specific point in time (p. 9). Munt applies this theory to his main argument.

Medina's position as an Islamic city was consolidated over the first three centuries AH largely because the ideas and doctrines attached to its sacred space evolved and were adapted over time after the death of Muhammad to retain their relevance for influential groups of scholars and rulers. (p. 10)

While Munt does engage deeply with theories of sanctification and sacred spaces, the book could have benefitted from the perspectives offered by these disciplines, especially the work of scholars who could serve as his interlocutors and help him contextualize his study of Madinah in the context of the greater Islamic landscape. In this regard, the most appropriate scholars would be those who have offered theoretical perspectives on the construction of sacred space within the context of politics and conflict.

The book would also have benefited from the author's deeper engagement with numerous recent works of scholarship that deal with similar thematic issues, such as those of Nancy Khalek, Zayde Antrim, David Chidester, and Edward Linenthal in *American Sacred Space*, whose work on modern American sacred space examines the sanctification of spaces that arise out of conflict. *The Holy City of Medina* would be most appropriate for a graduate-level course on sacred space or early Islamic history. It represents a commendable contribution from within the discipline of history that will reduce the dearth of scholarship that grapples with the nuances of sacred space in the medieval Islamic context.

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