Introduction

Throughout Islamic history sacred spaces have always held immense political, religious and cultural significance; the king of Saudi Arabia today holds as his official title *khādim al-ḥaramayn*, 'Guardian of the Two Sanctuaries' (Mecca and Medina), and more than two million Muslims now travel from all over the world each year to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Many of them will also visit Medina.[1] As the town that offered the Prophet protection when his own people denied him, as the location of the first Muslim polity, the first mosque, Muḥammad's sanctuary (*ḥaram*) and his grave, and as the earliest centre of the Islamic empire at the time when the Muslim armies were conquering most of the Middle East, Medina's position in the salvation history of the Muslim community is clear today.

The continued political valence of the title *khādim al-ḥaramayn* – a title apparently first used by Saladin in an inscription of 587/1191 in Jerusalem[2] – and the number of contemporary visitors demonstrate the staggering success of those who have worked over the centuries to patronise Medina's sacred spaces and to promote its widely accepted status as a holy city. In such modern studies as exist of Medina's sacred space(s) and its history as a holy city for Muslims worldwide, scholars commonly assert that the town was 'sanctified' originally through the Prophet's emigration (Ar. *hijra*) there from Mecca in 1/622, his establishment of a *ḥaram* there, and then further by his death and burial there. Albert Arazi, in a

[1] For a study of modern pilgrimage to Medina, see Behrens, *Garten des Paradieses*, 227–76.
[2] *EI*², s.v. 'Khādim al-Ḥaramayn' (B. Lewis).

stimulating article, summarised this view succinctly: 'The *hijra* to Medina, ancient Yathrib, gave that town a new dimension, that of sanctity.' Then, after the establishment of a *ḥaram* there and with the placement of Muḥammad's grave there, Medina attained 'a surplus of sanctity'.[3]

There is little doubt that Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina and his death were events with enormous repercussions for the early Muslim community.[4] We may, however, have good reason to feel unsatisfied with a narrative of Medina's sanctification, its emergence as a holy city, that considers most of the process to have been over shortly after the time of Muḥammad's death in 11/632. This narrative leaves a number of questions unanswered. Put simply, we should not assume that Medina would have invoked the same significance for Muslims of the second/eighth or third/ninth centuries as it had for those of the first/seventh. The purpose of this book is to present a greater sense of the diachronic and gradual processes by which Medina's sanctity was first developed and then consolidated. Chapter 1 investigates some practices of sanctifying space which existed in the Ḥijāz on the eve of Muḥammad's career; the following chapter then seeks to explain why he chose to declare a *ḥaram* – one of the most socially and religiously important of these pre-Islamic forms of sacred space – at Medina and, in doing so, how he adapted that pre-Islamic practice. In Chapter 3, I address the developments in ideas of what a *ḥaram* was after Muḥammad's death and the subsequent rapid conquest by his followers of widespread territories with different religious and political traditions of their own. It is to be expected that any such developments would affect doctrines about Medina's *ḥaram* and its perceived sanctity, and we will see that some Muslims even came to question the existence of a *ḥaram* at Medina.

The second half of the book takes the discussion beyond Medina's *ḥaram*. Chapter 4 turns to the creation of a sacred landscape in Medina

[3] Arazi, 'Matériaux', 177, 179.

[4] Two recent books have addressed the significance of the second of these events: Powers, *Muḥammad Is Not the Father*; Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*. The significance of the *hijra* is amply testified by the fact that the Muslim calendar came, relatively early, to be counted from this date. The earliest extant usage of this calendar system comes famously in a bilingual Greek-Arabic papyrus dated to 30 Pharmouthi of indiction one (in Greek) and 'the month of Jumādā I of the year 22' (in Arabic), both of which coincide to give April 643 CE. This, and no extant other document of the first/seventh century, however, offers any explicit rationale for the inauguration of this new calendar. For an edition with discussion of the papyrus (*PERF* 558), see Grohmann, 'Aperçu', 40–4; also see Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 547–8. For a discussion of the evolution of the significance of *hijra* in Islamic thought, see Crone, 'First-century concept'.

by caliphs and the town's local historians through the construction and discussion of numerous specific sites scattered across the oasis which commemorated Muḥammad's career there as both a prophet and the founder of a social and political community. Chapter 5 seeks to answer the surprisingly difficult question of when and why Muslims from across the territory of the caliphate started to undertake pilgrimages to Medina. These chapters demonstrate two broad points. Firstly, that the doctrines associated with Medina's holiness, and the reasons behind it, did not remain static; rather they were continually renegotiated and debated. Secondly, that Medina's widely venerated sanctity was a product not only of Muḥammad's actions, but also of those caliphs and religious scholars who among them laid claim to his political, religious and legal authority in the centuries following his death. In Chapter 6, I draw things together by investigating why so many caliphs and scholars invested considerable effort to promote Medina's sanctity and to transform the town into a holy city. I show that this caliphal and scholarly patronage of Medina's sacred spaces is intimately linked to the caliphs' and scholars' gradually emerging need to establish that they had legitimately inherited their exercise of political, legal and religious authority from the Prophet, who had exercised such authority himself, as God's final Messenger, for the first Muslim community at Medina.

The focus of a large proportion of modern scholarship on early Islamic history has demonstrated how gradually many of the doctrines, sectarian affiliations, ideas about the exercise of religious and political authority and many more issues associated with 'classical' (for want of a better word) Islam emerged. Studies of evolving attitudes towards sacred spaces have played their part in this modern scholarly endeavour, with a particularly heavy focus on Mecca and Jerusalem.[5] Early Islamic Jerusalem provides a particularly stark example of the emphasis recent scholarship

[5] For Mecca, see in particular the relevant studies by Hawting given in the bibliography; also see Rubin, 'Kaʿba'; Crone, 'First-century concept', 385–7; McMillan, *Meaning of Mecca*; and, famously, Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, esp. 21–6. Among the many studies of early Islamic Jerusalem, see, with further bibliography, Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem*; idem, 'Abd al-Malik'; idem, 'Why did ʿAbd al-Malik build the Dome of the Rock?'; and Lassner, 'Muslims on the sanctity of Jerusalem'. There are also a large number of studies on early Islamic attitudes towards Jerusalem by Livne-Kafri, including, for example, 'Note', and 'Jerusalem', and some apposite points in Rubin, 'Between Arabia and the Holy Land'. Research has increasingly demonstrated that claims for sanctity were by no means restricted to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem in the first three or four Islamic centuries. Two classic studies are Kister, 'You shall only set out for three mosques', and idem, 'Sanctity joint and divided'; recently, Yaron Friedmann has put forward bold claims regarding Kufa in 'Kūfa is better'.

has placed on the fact that developing and evolving Islamic doctrines – in this case particularly concerning attitudes to sacred space – should be studied with reference to the relevant historical backdrop: a mid seventh-century CE Armenian historian gives us early evidence of Jerusalem's and Palestine's importance as a land that was holy to the nascent Muslim community,[6] but few historians nowadays would seek to understand the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān's (r. 65–86/685–705) construction of the Dome of the Rock without reference to the period of civil war that engulfed the Islamic world during the late first/seventh century, generally known as the second *fitna*. The aim of this book is to put within a proper historical framework the development of ideas connected to Medina's sacred space and its emergence as a holy city.

This, then, is a study of a sacred space and a holy city in its early Islamic and western Arabian contexts. There is a long history in Western scholarship of attempts to define the terms 'holy' and 'sacred', with perhaps the most influential early discussions being those of Émile Durkheim and Rudolf Otto. Durkheim, whose *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* was first published in 1912, argued that one major feature of all religions is their classification of objects as either 'sacred' or 'profane', and that '[t]he sacred thing is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity'. Sacred things are protected by interdictions, while profane things have interdictions applied to them to keep them away from the sacred; transfer is possible between the two states, but only through the enactment of specified rites.[7] Otto, whose detailed study *Das Heilige* appeared shortly afterwards in 1917, separated the 'holy' (*Heilige*) into two distinct parts. In the first part, the term has come to be equated with everything that is 'completely good' or 'perfectly moral', while the second meaning – which Otto calls the 'numinous' – 'cannot be strictly defined', although his choice of the Latin word *numen*, 'divine will', as the basis for his term suggests that he saw this aspect of the holy as thoroughly and totally connected to God or another divine power.[8] A century of scholarship following pioneers such as Durkheim and Otto has not, to my knowledge, led to the establishment of a consensus on an exact

[6] *Armenian History*, I, 95–7, 102–3.

[7] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 36–42 (quote from 40). Durkheim's definition of the sacred in opposition to the profane, that is, what it is not, was also employed by some groups in classical and late antiquity; for the rabbis, see Fine, *This Holy Place*, 11. For one attempt to understand how Arabic-speaking Muslims have sought to define the sacred, see Gardet, 'Notion et sens'.

[8] Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, passim but esp. 5, 7, 110.

definition of the holy and the sacred. A concept that is tricky to define precisely, however, can still hold heuristic value, perhaps especially if understood quite loosely. I use the two terms as synonyms to refer broadly to something associated with the divine that is protected by regulations and/or rites from things that are not holy/sacred.

Sacred space in turn is a concept which anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and historians of religion have analysed extensively.[9] Their work suggests that a sacred space is one clearly defined and distinguished from other spaces, and one which focuses attention on the objects within it and the actions performed within it. There is an enormous range of different types of sacred spaces, from individual rooms within a building, to single structures often known as shrines (for example, temples, saints' tombs, churches, synagogues, mosques), to entire cities or vast, uninhabited spaces. Those features shared by the variety of spaces considered sacred often include clearly defined boundaries, certain rituals which can only be performed within, and special regulations which must be adhered to in order to enter them and/or within them; the latter are frequently aimed at ensuring the maintenance of strict levels of ritual purity. Many sacred spaces are sites of pilgrimage, often at specific times, and as such can interact with sacred time. On a practical, more everyday level, sacred spaces usually serve to meet a number of social and economic needs required by the group(s) that considers them as such; at the same time, the regulations attached to them may be guaranteed by threats of terrible punishment for those who err, but such measures do not always prevent them from being disobeyed by those who feel that they can get away with this. Ultimately, the term 'sacred space' retains a greater value, especially as a comparative tool, if it is not restricted too tightly to places that share all of these features. For my purposes here, a space is considered 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. This connection can, of course, be made through a venerated representative of the divine, such as a prophet, angel or holy man.[10]

[9] For some classic introductory discussions, see Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 367–87; idem, *Sacred and the Profane*, 20–65; Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*; idem, *Imagining Religion*, esp. 53–65; idem, *To Take Place*. For two good discussions of the usefulness of some historians' approaches to sacred space, see Friedland and Hecht, 'Politics of sacred place', 24–8; Hamilton and Spicer, 'Defining the holy'.

[10] The social significance of holy men in late antiquity was underlined in Brown, 'Rise and function', although cf. in part now idem, *Authority and the Sacred*, 55–78. For the early Islamic period, see Robinson, 'Prophecy and holy men'.

When a particularly widely venerated sacred space covers an entire urban area, or when a number of sacred spaces are concentrated in a single urban area, that area can then be called a 'holy city'.[11] By this definition, all holy cities possess sacred space(s), but not all urban areas with sacred spaces should be considered holy cities. This book's effort to contextualise Medina's emergence and appeal as a holy city in the early Islamic centuries will, therefore, investigate how Muslims came to see spaces in and around the town as sacred to begin with, but also how and why those sacred spaces continued to be venerated so widely across the Islamic world.

'HOW ON EARTH COULD PLACES BECOME HOLY?'

It was with this question that R. A. Markus entitled an important article, published in 1994, on the processes through which Christians in the fourth century CE overcame their earlier hesitancy to grant particular places on earth any higher degree of holiness. The question seems odd in some respects because of the relative abundance of sacred sites of one sort or another across the world, throughout most known religions. As Markus himself noted after posing his question, 'An earlier generation of scholars of religion would not have seen a problem here.'[12] A famous Romanian scholar of religion, Mircea Eliade, had pre-empted Markus's question with the statement that, 'Every kratophany and hierophany whatsoever transforms the place where it occurs: hitherto profane, it is thenceforward a sacred area.'[13]

Eliade's statement is certainly direct and, on one level, appealing: it seems obvious that for any place to be considered sacred, some great manifestation of the divine, a hierophany, should have taken place there. Yet for the historian, this immediately raises questions. A hierophany can only be considered as such in the eye of the beholder; someone needs to both witness it – in one way or another – and consider it as such. It is no good for the sacred simply to make itself manifest; people have to sit up and take note. The logical conclusion is that every manifestation of the sacred will fit into a historical context, otherwise it will be misunderstood.[14]

[11] For a similar definition, see Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca*, 3.
[12] Markus, 'How on earth could places become holy?', quotation from 258.
[13] Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 367; for a summary and critique of Eliade's work on sacred space, see Smith, *Map Is Not Territory*, 88–103.
[14] See, for example, Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 48: 'Beliefs, for instance, must be set precisely against their social context.' Or, as one Ṣaʿṣaʿa b. Ṣūḥān al-ʿAbdī is said to have put it during a conversation with Muʿāwiya, according to Ibn al-Faqīh, *Buldān*, 115: 'Surely the

How places initially come to be considered sacred is only one part of the problem. There is also the rather obvious fact that all such spaces are different in so many aspects. Certain generalities may be shared by many – sacred spaces are, for example often associated with certain topographical features, such as mountains, rivers, springs or stones[15] – but these often operate at little more than a superficial level and, in any case, their appearance can hardly be expected universally. Even one place can function as a sacred space in different ways for different communities at different times. Jerusalem is the most obvious case in point: not only did Jews, Christians and Muslims hold that city holy for different reasons, but members of the same faith treated it differently. Late antique and medieval Christians, for example, debated among themselves the legitimacy of pilgrimage to Jerusalem.[16]

The appropriation or sharing of one group's sacred space by another is a common phenomenon. A well-known example is the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. ʿAbd al-Malik's (r. 86–96/705–15) decision to construct his new mosque in Damascus on the site of a Christian church dedicated to John the Baptist, the latter itself having been constructed on the site of an earlier temple dedicated to Jupiter.[17] Again, consideration of the historical context is crucial here. Older sacred spaces have not always been appropriated by conquerors or other newcomers, and plenty of examples exist where a given holy site has fallen out of use over time. A good case is the gradual abandonment of the shrine of St Sergius at Ruṣāfa in northern Syria during the centuries following the Islamic conquest. This shrine provides a noteworthy example of a sacred space that appears to have continued to thrive immediately after the conquest, but ultimately did fall out of use. Why some sacred spaces endure and others fall aside is a question that can only be answered by going beyond the search for the origins of a given place's sanctity.[18]

On a more abstract level the problems persist even further: How can we reconcile the existence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam of specific locations held sacred together with canonical scriptural injunctions that

land does not make its people holy, but rather its people make it holy' (*fa-inna al-arḍ lā tuqaddisu ahlahā lākinna ahlahā yuqaddisūnahā*).

[15] A classic study is Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 165–212; for more recent comments in this vein in a study of medieval Syrian sacred spaces, see Meri, *Cult of Saints*, 12, 14, 47–9.

[16] Constable, 'Opposition to pilgrimage'; Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*.

[17] This and other late antique examples are discussed in Fowden, 'Sharing holy places'.

[18] In the case of St Sergius at Ruṣāfa, fortunately, such a study exists: Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, esp. 174–91 on the site's post-conquest history.

God is everywhere and can be worshipped everywhere? There are plenty of Quranic passages in favour of the idea of sacred spaces (discussed further in Chapter 1), but nonetheless Q2.142 states:

> The fools among the people will say, 'Whatsoever has led them away from their *qibla* to which they used to adhere?' Say, 'To God belong the east and the west; He guides whomsoever He wishes to a straight path.'

According to some commentators on the Qurʾān, one of the reasons for God's refusal to grant Moses' request that He make his community the chosen one is that the Israelites would not make prayer places (*masājid*) of the entire earth, but would instead pray only in the synagogue (*kanīsa*).[19] Certain aspects of this long-enduring tension have been nicely drawn out in a study of seventeenth-century New England Puritans, which demonstrated that although they rejected in principle the idea of sacred space and time, in practice they continued to hold certain times, notably Sundays, and places sacred.[20]

It was perhaps to work around conundrums such as this that scholars of many religions came up with the idea of grades or a hierarchy of sanctity. Durkheim did not accept a purely hierarchical distinction between the sacred and the profane – indeed he insisted on the absolute distinction between the two – but he still did accept the existence of 'sacred things of every degree'.[21] The rabbis, for example, applied a hierarchy to sacred space in an oft-cited passage from the Mishnah, *Kelim* 1.6–9, which outlines ten grades of holiness, starting with 'the land of Israel is holier than all other lands', and ending with the most sacred 'holy of holies' inside the Temple.[22] In an important study of the general phenomenon of holy cities in Islam, Gustave von Grunebaum suggested a tripartite taxonomy of sacred space, in increasing order of significance[23]: sanctity deriving from the *baraka*, 'blessing', dispensed by the tomb of a prophet or a 'saint'[24]; sanctity stemming from a place's soteriological

[19] Discussion in Kister, '*Lā taqraʾū*', 151–5. Among many relevant Biblical injunctions, mention can be made of 1 Kings 8.27 and Acts 17.24.

[20] Walsh, 'Holy time'. On this problem in late antique Christianity, see Markus, 'How on earth could places become holy?'; it is also worth bearing in mind Jonathan Z. Smith's general dichotomy (*Map Is Not Territory*, esp. 101) between 'locative' and 'utopian' visions of the world.

[21] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, esp. 37–9.

[22] Bokser, 'Approaching sacred space', esp. 289–90; Fine, *This Holy Place*, 12. Muslim scholars writing on the distinctive merits (*faḍāʾil*) of Syria picked up and adapted this rabbinic hierarchy; see, for example, Ibn al-Murajjā, *Faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis*, 115 (§136).

[23] Von Grunebaum, 'Sacred character'.

[24] For more on *baraka* from saints' tombs, see Meri, *Cult of Saints*, esp. 12–58.

role; sanctity stemming from an area's cosmological significance.[25] For the role of sacred spaces in Islamic history, M. J. Kister has since complicated this picture by demonstrating how separate places could combine and thus reinforce each other's holiness. Some medieval scholars, for example, recommended setting out on the pilgrimage to Mecca from the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, while others noted that those who visited the tombs of Muḥammad in Medina and Abraham in Hebron in the same year would enter Paradise.[26] These sacred hierarchies and interrelationships could change over time – some places could become more sacred, others less so – and such alterations can only be understood fully within their appropriate historical context.

Maurice Halbwachs, in his study of the sacred topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land, has perhaps best articulated the suggestion that when spaces remain sacred the doctrines and associations attached to them tend to develop to retain their relevance.[27] As such, the creation and maintenance of sacred space is best understood as a process rather than an act that occurred at a single moment in time. The reasons for any long-lived sacred space's acceptance as such have to evolve and adapt over time as political and social circumstances change; as such, ideas about the space's original raison d'être can change as well. Sacred space is culturally constructed and reconstructed. As Halbwachs put it:

> Sacred places thus commemorate not facts certified by contemporary witnesses but rather beliefs born perhaps not far from these places and strengthened by taking root in this environment.
>
> Whatever epoch is examined, attention is directed not toward the first events, or perhaps the origin of these events, but rather toward the group of believers and toward their commemorative work. When one looks at the physiognomy of the holy places in successive times, one finds the character of these groups inscribed.[28]

This is perhaps an obvious idea, but nonetheless a powerful and thoroughly convincing one. The world is littered with places formerly perceived as sacred which are no longer seen as such because the beliefs

[25] Von Grunebaum fitted Medina into the second of these categories. For a fourth-/tenth-century narrative which hints at a similar taxonomy, see al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*, 166–7; also discussed in Lassner, 'Muslims on the sanctity of Jerusalem', 178–9.

[26] See Kister, 'Sanctity joint and divided', esp. 27 for these two examples.

[27] Halbwachs, *Topographie légendaire*; the conclusion to this work is translated in idem, *On Collective Memory*, 193–225.

[28] Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 199, 234–5 [= idem, *Topographie légendaire*, 157, 205]. Essentially the same point has been made in Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 36–52, for example at 44: 'sacred persistence … is primarily exegesis.'

attached to them did not remain relevant. There are also numerous examples of sacred sites that remained in use for long periods, sometimes over millennia, but to which the exegetical legends attached substantially altered over time. A study of the shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī (d. 562/1166) in Yasī (now in southern Kazakhstan), built by Temür (r. 771–807/1370–1405) in the late eighth/fourteenth century, has shown how even over a relatively short period the extent hagiographical and doctrinal material connected to that sacred space developed in its environment after the original foundation of the shrine.[29] I will demonstrate throughout this book that Medina's position as an Islamic holy city was consolidated over the first three centuries AH largely because the ideas and doctrines attached to its sacred spaces evolved and were adapted over time after the death of Muḥammad to retain their relevance for influential groups of scholars and rulers.

It remains here to note the intimate connection at most points of Islamic history between sacred space, economics and politics. The economic function of holy places is often immediately apparent: numerous such locations have been associated with markets and trade fairs, particularly but not exclusively connected to times of pilgrimage. The famous market fairs of late antique and medieval Europe and the Mediterranean are a good case for this point, as are the pre-Islamic pilgrim fairs in the vicinity of Mecca, at ʿUkāẓ, Dhū al-Majāz and Majanna.[30]

The close connection between politics and sacred spaces, particularly but not always through rulers' patronage, has already been seen in the example of Temür's construction of the shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī. Modern scholars have discussed various aspects of this issue, and Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, in their study of conflicts over Jerusalem in the twentieth century, have made a forceful plea for historians to take the political context of the development of sacred spaces much more seriously.[31] Why have rulers and elites – and, more recently, politicians – been so eager to promote their attachment to sacred spaces and to control others' access to them? One reason is simply control. Many sacred spaces, because of the widespread veneration attached to them, were areas which left uncontrolled could offer an ideological focus for opposition. Also very

[29] DeWeese, 'Sacred places'. For an example, from northern Iraq, of a site whose sanctity can be witnessed in the early first millennium BCE and again in late antiquity, see Walker, 'Legacy of Mesopotamia'.

[30] On these, see Crone, *Meccan Trade*, 170–80; Peters, *Hajj*, 33–5.

[31] Friedland and Hecht, 'Politics of sacred place', 23; see also Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca*, 33.