

# Why Mecca

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The *Dalā il al- ayrāt* is one of the most important and widespread Islamic prayer collections. It is well known from Morocco, where it was composed, to as far as Southeast Asia and there are several thousand manuscripts existing worldwide which contain this work. The Munich Codex dated 1857, but also several other manuscripts and various printed editions show, after a general introduction, a two-sided illustration of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Manuscripts of this kind are the result of a longer development which started with non-illustrated manuscripts of the *Dalā il al- ayrāt*. But why are the illustrations showing both Mecca and Medina although Mecca is not the subject matter of the prayer collection at all?

 fig. 1: Mu ammad b. Sulaymān al- azūlī: *Dalā il al- ayrāt* (Mecca and Medina)

Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.arab.2673 (13v, 14r), 1857

In: Rebhan, Helga: Die Wunder der Schöpfung. Handschriften der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek aus dem islamischen Kulturreich. Wiesbaden 2010, p. 216/217.

The *Dalā il al- ayrāt* ("Guide of Good Deeds"), a collection of prayers, intercessions and blessings for the Prophet Mu ammad, is the main work of the Moroccan mystic al- azūlī (died around 1465). It is one of the texts with religious content which has been copied and commented on the most. As the focus lies on the Prophet Mu ammad who is particularly worshipped as the prophet of Islam, great store has always been set by the visual design of manuscripts of the *Dalā il al- ayrāt*. In many cases the design even corresponds to that of the Qur'an: gilt frame, illuminated opening pages, golden dividers between sections or enumerations as well as precious bindings.

One passage at the beginning of the text deals with the burial site of the Prophet Mu ammad in Medina. It describes his tomb and the place where it is located in the mosque. Furthermore, the tombs of his two companions Abū Bakr and Umar are described. This passage obviously inspired scribes and illuminators to add a (often two-dimensional and quite schematic) one-sided picture of Medina and the burial chambers to the text which, presumably, was originally not illustrated.

 fig. 2: *Dalā il al- ayrāt* (Mecca) Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.arab.2673(13v), 1857

Since the early 16th century, an increasing number of manuscripts of *Dalā il al- ayrāt* can be found in which the one-sided picture is complemented by another illustration of Medina on the opposite page showing the pulpit (minbar) and the prayer niche (mi rāb) in the prophet's

mosque (al-mas id an-nabawī). This kind of two-sided illustration reflects a preference for geometric constructions and symmetry, which is also shown by the design of many other manuscripts of texts focusing on a wide range of different topics.

However the fact that Mecca is shown on the opposite page, as in the Munich Codex, is a more recent phenomenon which cannot be found in earlier manuscripts (f. 13v, fig. 2). Even though the concept of a two-sided illustration was maintained, showing Mecca and Medina on opposite pages is an interesting phenomenon given that Mecca is not the subject matter of the

Dalā il al- ayrāt. Therefore, the reason for this innovation cannot be found in the text itself. Manuscripts of this kind have been produced exclusively in the East of the Arab World since the late 18th/early 19th century. This change in the manner of illustrating manuscripts coincides both regionally and in time, with the emergence of the Wahhābīya, a conservative and militant movement of Sunni Islam. The followers of this movement represent today the largest religious group in Saudi Arabia's population, and their teaching is state doctrine. They militate against several forms of popular belief and refuse not only stronger forms of prophetic worship but also mortuary cult and the worshipping of deceased saints, which had become a widely spread custom in the entire Islamic world.

 fig. 3: Dalā il al- ayrāt (Medina), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.arab.2673 (1v), 1857

The fact that illustrations of Mecca and Medina are shown on opposite pages of the manuscripts of the Dalā il al- ayrāt presumably results from the aforesaid criticism of distinct forms of prophetic worship and mortuary cult, which was deemed being reflected by two illustrations of Medina of which one is showing the prophet's mosque and the other the tombs. This seems to have made people believe that it is not Allāh but the Prophet Mu ammad who is actually being worshipped. One possible explanation is that by showing an illustration of the Ka ba, the House of God, one intended to face the presumed disproportion between the worshipping of the Prophet and God. The fact that not only tombs were illustrated any longer, but - as is the case with the present manuscript - even entire buildings, which were also drawn in perspective since the 19th century, backs the thesis that the resistance against the mortuary cult and the worshipping of deceased saints was the reason for a change in illustration.

 fig. 4: Dalā il al- ayrāt (Medina) Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.arab.2673(14r), 1857

The Munich Codex, which was presumably composed in Istanbul in 1857, is the result of a longer development which spans altogether four centuries. It attests to the establishment of a new influential movement, both politically and religiously, which apparently influenced manuscript design in the East of the Arab World with lasting effect.

Another remarkable feature of this manuscript: The entire manuscript presents the so-called Turkish Rococo style. Both the geometrical and floral elements (f. 1v, fig. 3) and the

naturalistic views of landscapes and cities drawn in perspective have been characteristic of Ottoman art and architecture since the middle of the 18th century, clearly reflecting European influence. Furthermore, the explosive light or gold fountain above the cupola of the prophet's mosque that symbolizes the holiness of this place is another important detail (f. 14r, fig. 4). Although Mecca is shown on the opposite page, the reader's attention is again drawn to Medina, the prophet's mosque and the tombs situated in the mosque. This is how the direct reference to the text is re-established.

#### **References**

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#### **Description**

Cod.arab. 2673  
Istanbul?, 1857.  
Acquired 1987.  
Paper, 87 Folios, 20x12,5 cm.  
Arabic.  
.Illuminated, with illustrations