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Hagit Nol*

Early Mosques that have Never Been (Found): Literary Sources Versus Physical Remains

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Abstract: Mosques are one main type of evidence to represent early Islam in the archaeological record. Dating mosques is crucial for pinpointing the earliest presence of the Muslim faith in a region and to test certain historical narratives known from the literary sources. Scholars, however, sometimes date medieval mosques in excavations and surveys relying on literary sources. Following these texts has led to dating several mosque remains to the seventh or eighth century. In contrast, archaeologically independent dating tools support only later or indefinite dates for these ancient structures. This article presents four sites that consist of a mosque each of which has been dated to the seventh or eighth century: Fustāt, Jerusalem, Wāsit, and Ramla. Through these case studies, supplemented by similar examples, I demonstrate the gap between the literary sources and the material evidence. Interpreting relevant epigraphical data, as well as excavation results from many more sites, suggests that the spread of mosques beyond the Arabian Peninsula and Greater Syria occurred only in the ninth century. The literary sources, therefore, cannot be read at face value and can certainly not form the basis for interpreting and dating physical remains.

Keywords: Early Islam, 'Amr Mosque, the Aqṣā Mosque, Dome of the Rock, K. A. C. Creswell, stratified excavations, archaeological dating tools

The debate among modern historians of the Islamic world over the reliability of literary sources for reconstructing the past is ongoing and heated. In addition to the necessary critical view of any text, the literature on the first centuries of Islam was compiled at least 200 years after the events and poses another set of challenges. In fact, following the literature from the late ninth and tenth centuries, the next boom of historical accounts derives from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries,¹ with

¹ Konrad HIRSCHLER, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012, 17–18.

*Corresponding author: Hagit Nol, Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, Frankfurt a.M., Germany, nol@em.uni-frankfurt.de