MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC HOSPITALS: STRUCTURAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS

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How were the philosophies of medical treatment and social rules regarding the ill manifested in the building design of medieval Islamic hospitals (bimaristans or maristans)? This question does not simply instigate consideration into how Islamic hospitals were constructed, but seeks to explore what social rules and understandings of disease, the ill and treatment can be detected from the buildings themselves by examining them within their environmental, social and philosophical context. The scholarly focus on the architecture and archaeology of hospitals from this era has concentrated on describing architectural details, which are frequently devoid of interpretations related to concepts of healing, beliefs about the body, illness and hygiene prevalent at the time of their construction and use. Yet, it has been shown in more general archaeological and anthropological studies of space that people’s relationships to structures are imbued with cultural rules regarding their use, design and flow of movement. Nonetheless, such research has so far eluded attention in medical history, particularly in the periods prior to the seventeenth century.

Attitudes towards illness and medicine formed from viewpoints of healing and cultural taboos of disease can be detected within the layout of buildings associated with healing and the ill. Building arrangements can also inform us of social attitudes towards the sick and their treatment that might not have been recorded in the written record. Hence, the aim of this paper is to rectify this disparity in academic discourse by using Islamic hospitals (10th to 14th centuries) as a case-study to demonstrate how physical spaces of healing are shaped by social attitudes towards the ill and philosophical understandings of treatment and care. Furthermore, a methodology for discerning social understandings in structures without much, if any, reliance on written sources will be demonstrated.

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The majority of studies of *bimaristans* from the medieval era tend to focus on extant literature that omits a close analysis of relevant physical remains. It is evident from textual examinations that the activities undertaken in the structures were different to what one would expect in modern western hospitals, and this has guided interesting deliberations and debates over how the term ‘hospital’ was defined by doctors, patients and the general public at the time. These debates sometime also question what a Byzantine hospital was because they are frequently considered in investigations concerned with the origin of Islamic hospitals. Islamic hospital definitions, or definitions of any hospital for that matter, change over time, especially with developments in medical theories and/or new contacts made between groups of people with different conceptions of bodily care, health and disease, which in the period in question occurred through intellectual debates between Muslims, Jews and Christians relating to philosophy, science and medicine. Exchange of ideas might also have come about via long-distance trade routes and the sometimes turbulent history of the era, such as with the Crusades, for example.

Examination of the archaeological remains, both structures and material culture, offers a critical supplement to the literary evidence and it can often inform us of past activities and thoughts that were not recorded in writing. In some instances the archaeological record contradicts evidence

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