V

Toward an Iconography of Medieval Diaspora Synagogues

Introduction

IN 1942, the great architectural historian Richard Krautheimer published a seminal article titled 'Introduction to an "Iconography" of Medieval Architecture', which explored the ways in which churches were considered to be copies of earlier buildings.[1] According to Krautheimer, medieval ecclesiastical architecture was judged not only according to its satisfaction of construction requirements, but by the building's accommodation of necessary liturgical functions, and its expression of an intended symbolic content. Church buildings were thought to convey a meaning that transcended the architectural fabric of the structure.

Until the thirteenth century, when the emergence of analytical methods in the natural sciences encouraged more exact copying in architecture, according to Krautheimer, medieval buildings that imitated others could be based on selective aspects or singular characteristics of the model. Particular forms were considered to have symbolic value. For example, a circular shape — as exemplified by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem — signified virtue and perfection (Fig. 1), but exact imitation was not required

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[1] Krautheimer's article was first published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 5(1942), pp. 1–33. It was reprinted in a volume of his collected essays (*Studies in Early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance Art* [New York and London, 1969], pp. 115–150).

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for the copy to serve its intended purpose. As a result, various circular or polygonal churches built from the ninth to the twelfth centuries with differing architectural features were all considered representations of the church on the site of Jesus' death, Entombment, and Resurrection, making it the most frequently copied building in the Middle Ages.[2] The incorporation of a single physical characteristic based on number, such as the model's measurements or its total of columns, could also signify the intended relationship between model and copy. A copied dedication, perhaps linked to a relic or to the visual representation of some part of the original, sufficed to relate two buildings. The result of both selective or comprehensive imitations of a model by means of material or architectural elements, wrote Krautheimer, was to remind 'the faithful of the venerated site, [to evoke] his devotion and [to give] him a share at least in the reflections of the blessings which he could have enjoyed if he had been able to visit the Holy Site in reality'.[3]

In his study, Krautheimer limited his discussion to Christian monuments, despite having written his *Habilitationsschrift* on medieval synagogues.[4] Still, his analysis of the typology of relationships between model and copy in medieval architecture suggests a method for analysing medieval rabbis' understanding of the kinship between synagogues and the archetype of all Jewish houses of worship, the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem. Although the number of extant medieval synagogues is small in comparison with those estimated to have existed, the relationship between Temple and synagogue is additionally attested to by extant dedicatory inscriptions, and by other types of literary evidence, including biblical commentary, codes of law, and rabbinic responsa.

Some of the relationships between Christian architectural models and their copies hold true for the nexus between Temple and synagogue. Jewish houses of worship were considered to symbolise the Temple by their rectangular shape or an approximation of one. The inclusion of furnishings patterned on those of the sanctuary in Jerusalem were akin to a copy's

[2] Robert Ousterhout, 'Meaning and Architecture: A Medieval View', *Reflections*, 2,1(1984), p. 37. (I want to thank William Clark for drawing my attention to this article.)

[3] Krautheimer, *Introduction to An Iconography of Medieval Architecture*, p. 127.

[4] Richard Krautheimer, *Mittelalterliche Synagogen* (Berlin, 1927). As noted by Margaret Olin, Krautheimer later referred to this work as 'not a good book'. (Margaret Olin, *The Nation without Art* [Lincoln and London, 2001], p. 241 no. 14.)

possession of relics related to the model in Krautheimer's schema, although in synagogues, the situation of the furnishings within the interior space was also meaningful in symbolising their placement in the Temple. An additional factor linking synagogue and Temple, similar to that relating a church and its copies, is the language of dedicatory inscriptions.

The Shape of the Synagogue

Early halakhic sources like the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmudim do not mention an exterior shape considered to be characteristic of synagogues; the subject arises only in the High Middle Ages. Rabbi Solomon ibn Abraham Adret of Barcelona (*ca.* 1235–*ca.* 1310) was asked to rule on the proposed joining of a nearby house to the eastern side of a synagogue.

'Reuben had a beautifully built house next to the sanctuary of a synagogue. He now wishes to connect his home to the synagogue in order to expand the synagogue. The congregation restrained him [from doing so] because a number of seats would have been devalued . . .'[5]

Since the width of the house was less than that of the eastern wall of the synagogue, its addition would allow fewer seats along the new eastern wall, and would also lessen the value of seats whose present worth depended on their placement relative to the existing ark and the reader's desk. Rabbi Adret allowed the house to be joined to the synagogue, despite the problem of the revaluation of the seats, and the change in the shape of the synagogue from a four-sided building to an eight-sided one with six interior angles. Obviously, the eccentric contour of the resulting synagogue did not pose a halakhic issue despite its deviation from the quadrilateral norm of the Temple. The medieval synagogues whose plans are known are all rectangular or trapezoidal, and sometimes nearly square as at Erfurt. In the eighteenth century, Rabbi Adret's responsum was cited by Ezekiel Landau (Rabbi of Prague and Chief Rabbi of Bohemia [1713–1793]), in his own book of responsa, *Nodeh bi-Yehudah*, as a precedent allowing the construction of an octagonal synagogue.

' . . . Regarding your question as to whether a synagogue may be octagonal or whether it must be four-sided and rectangular, I am surprised at the question! What made him think it should forbidden [to build an octago-

[5] Solomon ibn Abraham Adret, *She'elot u Teshuvot haRashba*, Pt. 1 (Lemberg, 1811), no. 581.

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nal synagogue]? And you sir answered him well in saying that this [matter] is nowhere mentioned in the *Shulhan Arukh*. I would add to your words that in all the early codes and in the two Talmudim, 'we have not seen any image', i.e. that a synagogue need not have a particular shape . . .'[6]

Rabbi Landau concluded his answer, however, by questioning the appropriateness of designing a synagogue in the circular form characteristic of palaces, suggesting his own awareness that the shape of a building symbolised its function. An example of a contemporaneous cylindrical synagogue is that at Wörlitz (Fig. 2), which was commissioned in 1789 by the reigning duke for his Jews, rather than by the congregation itself.[7]

Had no texts on the shape of synagogues existed, one would have to infer that medieval Jewry was aware of the symbolism associated with building types, because of their avoidance of the commonly built cruciform church plan, whose significance was repeatedly emphasised by Christian writers.[8] A number of synagogues whose plans are known appear to be modelled on lesser ecclesiastical buildings such as chapels or chapter houses. The synagogues of Worms (1174/5), the Altneuschul in Prague (1260/5), Buda (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries), and others all had a row of columns dividing the space into two naves, each consisting of two or more vaulted bays (Fig. 3). This plan was preferred despite the problems created by the placement of the reader's desk between two of the columns: the view of the Torah ark was obscured, and the architectural focus of prayer became of secondary emphasis for many of the worshippers (Fig. 4). Instead, the centrally-placed reader's desk became the primary visual focus.

The Symbolism of Synagogue Furnishings and their Placement

Maimonides (1138–1204) directed that the reader's desk be situated in the centre of the synagogue for a practical reason. The position of the desk allowed the entire congregation to hear the reading of the Torah equally well, '. . . We build the reader's desk in the middle of the synagogue . . . so

[6] Ezekiel Landau, *Noda bi-Yehudah*, Vol. 1, *Orah Hayyim*, no. 18.

[7] Carol Herselle Krinsky, *Synagogues of Europe. Architecture, History, Meaning* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1985), pp. 40, 72, Figs. 8–9, there the older literature. For the significance of the complex at Wörlitz of which the synagogue was a part, see Thomas Da Costa Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister, and City. The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450–1800* (Chicago, 1995), pp. 407–11.

[8] Krautheimer, *Introduction to An Iconography of Medieval Architecture*, p. 121.

that everyone can hear . . .'[9] Second, the central focus of the reader's desk transformed it into a symbol of the altar for incense in the *heikhal* in the Temple (the main hall used for divine services).[10] The reader's desk functioned, as it were, akin to a relic from the Holy Sepulchre placed in buildings that were its copies; it transformed the synagogue into a version of the Temple.

The interpretation of a synagogue as a reflection of the Temple is a concept that also appears in numerous discussions on the placement of the Hanukkah lamp in the house of prayer. These were summarised in a responsum of Israel ben Petaḥiah Isserlein (1390–1460) of Neustadt.[11] He wrote that Rashi (1040–1105) prescribed that the Temple menorah be oriented on the east-west axis as was the custom in Vienna, Kremsmunster, and his own city of Neustadt, but that Maimonides and Moses of Coucy (thirteenth century) advocated a placement along the north-south axis, closer to the south, in remembrance of the position of the Temple menorah on the south side of the *heikhal*. Maimonides' decision was adopted by Jacob ben Asher in his fourteenth-century Code of Jewish Law, the Tur: 'And in the synagogue, we place [the menorah] in the south in remembrance of the [Temple] menorah'.[12] A southern placement of the lamp emphasised the identification of the diaspora synagogue with the ancient centre of Jewish worship. The Hanukkah lamp is always referred to as a *menorah* in rabbinic literature, although its form may have differed from that of the seven-branched Temple lampstand.

Of interest in this regard is whether the custom of having a Hanukkah lamp in the late medieval synagogue represents a continuation of ancient practice, or whether it was a medieval innovation. The mosaics of early synagogues in the Land of Israel that depict their appurtenances usually include a pair of seven-branched *menorot* flanking the Torah ark (Fig. 5), and actual synagogue examples were found at sites such as the sixth-century synagogue at Ein Gedi.[13] Centuries, however, separate the seven-branched *menorot* of antiquity from the first mention of a Hanukkah

[9] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, 11:3.

[10] Ḥatam Sofer, Responsa. Part 1. *Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, no. 28 quoting Rashi in *Parashat Terumah* on the analogy of the reader's desk to the incense altar.

[11] Israel ben Petaḥiah Isserlein, *Terumat haDeshen*, no. 104.

[12] Jacob ben Asher, Tur, *Hilkhot Hanukkah*, 671:6.

[13] Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*, pp. 238–41, Figs. 54 a–b and 57.

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lamp in the synagogue during the eleventh century. These lamps were said to have been introduced to accommodate travellers, whose needs likewise inspired the public recitation of *kiddush*, the sanctification over wine before the Sabbath.[14] Other reasons given were *pirsumei nisah*, publicising the miracle of Hanukkah, and teaching congregants the correct order of the blessings.[15] None of these rationales, however, account for the timing of the appearance of Hanukkah lamps in medieval synagogues.

In the Carolingian period, Christians began to place large *menorot* in their churches, and through this appropriation of the prime symbol of the ancient Temple signified that the Church was the successor to Judaism.[16] The earliest extant example is that dedicated to the Essen Minster by Abbess Mathilda, granddaughter of Otto the Great, around the year 1000 (Fig. 6). As the number of church *menorot* multiplied, over fifty are known today, medieval Jewry may have felt inspired to reappropriate this primary Jewish symbol by placing large Hanukkah lamps in synagogues beginning in the eleventh century.

The Language of Dedicatory Inscriptions

Both the Jews of Spain and Ashkenaz expressed their synagogues' relationship to the Temple in Jerusalem in the language of their dedicatory inscriptions. *Ca.* 1360, Samuel HaLevi Abulafia referred to his synagogue's 'windows like the windows of Ariel' (i.e., Jerusalem), and stated that the appearance of his synagogue was like the work of Bezalel.[17] Isaac Mehab described his synagogue in Cordoba, completed in 1314/5, as a 'lesser' sanctuary (*mikdash me'at*; Fig. 7) i.e. in comparison with the Temple, the *Beit haMikdash*. The same term appears in the earliest dedicatory inscription from the Worms synagogue that was built in 1034.[18] These dedications quote from Ezekiel 11:16, on which Rashi had commented that the phrase

[14] Jacob ben Asher, Tur, *Hilkhot Hanukkah*, 671:6.

[15] Mordecai Jaffe, *Levush Orah Hayyim*, Hilkhot Hanukkah, 671:8.

[16] Peter Bloch, 'Siebenarmige Leuchter in christlichen Kirchen', *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch*, 23(1961), pp. 55–190.

[17] Mann, Glick, Dodds, eds. *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, p. 216.

[18] Otto Börcher, 'Die alte Synagoge zu Worms', *Die Wormsgau*, 18(1960), p. 101 for a photograph of the Hebrew inscription and a German translation.

mikdash me'at refers to synagogues, which were secondary in importance to the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the Temple. David Kimḥi (?1160–1235?) remarked on the same sentence in Ezekiel that if the children of Israel were distanced from the great sanctuary they would have lesser ones, that is, synagogues, in their lands of exile.

Conclusion

Krautheimer had suggested that the imitation of revered buildings, such as the Holy Sepulchre in local churches, afforded the Christian worshipper a sense that he would receive some of the same benefits accruing from an actual pilgrimage to a religious site. Most copies of the Holy Sepulchre date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a period that saw increased travel from Europe to the Middle East by crusaders and pilgrims.[19] These architectural copies of the Holy Sepulchre allowed the faithful to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem 'by proxy', especially in periods of disruption when travel was difficult.

One might argue that the many ways in which the synagogue was linked to the ancient Temple likewise served as a substitute for pilgrimage. Although accounts of medieval Jewish travellers to the Land of Israel are known, their numbers are minuscule in comparison to the total Jewish population, the majority of whom never achieved the spiritual goals of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or of settlement in the Holy Land.[20] Maimonides was one of those who criticised himself as a sinner for never settling in the Land of Israel, although he lived most of his life in nearby Fustat. Yet, the longing for Zion was often tempered in medieval Hebrew literature by a sense that living in the diaspora was not, by definition, 'bad'.[21] Judah Halevi's famous lament, 'My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West' can be read as acceptance of a life outside of the Land of Israel, rather than as a rallying cry for return to the ancestral homeland.[22] Similarly, Nahmanides account of his Disputation in Barcelona in 1263 posits that exile is bad, but surmounting its difficulties prepares the Jew for entry into

[19] Ousterhoot, *'Meaning and Architecture'*, p. 39.

[20] For a sample of accounts by medieval Jewish travellers, see Elkan Nathan Adler, ed., *Jewish Travellers in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1987).

[21] Marc Saperstein and Nancy E. Berg, 'Arab Chains and the Good Things of Sepharad', *AJS Review*, 26, 2(2002), p. 302.

[22] *Op. cit.*, p. 305.

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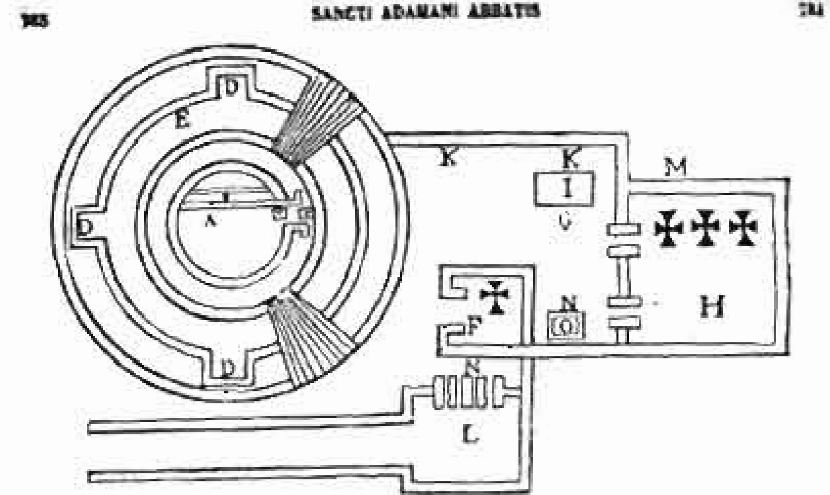
the World to Come, for the achievement of spiritual immortality.[23] This interpretation of two well-known texts from Sepharad is supported by other types of literary evidence.

Rabbinic writings of the thirteenth century express the value of the diaspora in an increased identification of the synagogue with the Temple, and of the diaspora with the Land of Israel. This emphasis may have been due to the persecutions resulting from the Crusades that began in 1096. An early text linking the community of Mainz with Zion and the Second Temple shows the beginning of the process. In a chronicle of the First Crusade, a Jew of Mainz mourns his community's destruction with the following words: 'Gone from Zion are all that were her glory — namely Mainz'.[24] The German community had become, metaphorically, part of the Holy Land. Mordecai ben Hillel haKohen (1240?–1298) commented on the talmudic tractate Shabbat that 'Our lesser sanctuary is to be regarded as having a sanctity essentially similar to that of the Temple'.[25] Menahem ben Solomon, known as the Meiri, who lived in Perpignan from 1249 to 1316, wrote the following in his commentary on the talmudic tractate Ketubbot: 'Every place where wisdom and fear of sin are found has the status of the Land of Israel. Thus the rabbis said: "Anyone who lives in Babylonia lives, as it were, in the Land of Israel"'.[26] Later, Chief Rabbi David ibn abi Zimra of Cairo (1480–1573) emphasised this relationship by noting '. . . And in a synagogue, it is better to place the menorah on the south side, since it is *comparable* to the menorah [of the Temple]'.[27]

In this worldview, the local synagogue — with its reader's desk representing the Temple altar of incense, and its Hanukkah lamp placed at the southern end of the building — became equivalent to the Temple. In the eyes of medieval man, the Temple was, as the art historian Walter Cahn has written, 'the persistent image of a fabulous creation, which could only be . . . duplicated piecemeal',[28] that is through selected elements. For medieval Jews in Europe, these symbols served to collapse the time and space separat-

[23] *Op. cit.*, p. 311.
[24] Alfred Haverkamp, 'Connections of Jews in Medieval Towns of the Latin Christian Diaspora', Conference on 'The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages', Speyer, October, 2002.
[25] Mordecai ben Hillel haKohen, *Beit ha-Behirah, Ketubot*, ed. M. Cohen (Jerusalem, 1976), p. 433.
[26] Meiri on Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot 5:1.
[27] David ibn abi Zimra, *Responsa Radbaz*, no. 510 = 945 (Italics mine.)
[28] Walter Cahn, 'Solomonic Elements in Romanesque Art', *The Temple of Solomon*.



1. Arculf of Gaul, *Plan of Holy Sepulchre*, ca. 680

2. Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorf, *Synagogue at Wörlitz*, Exterior, 1789/90

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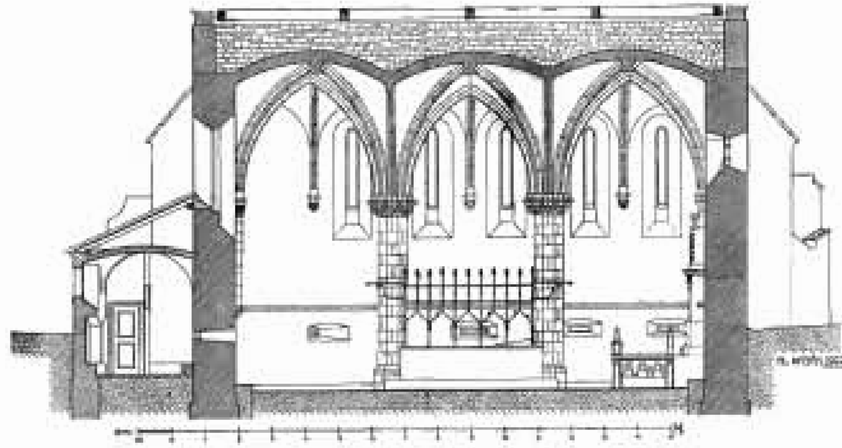
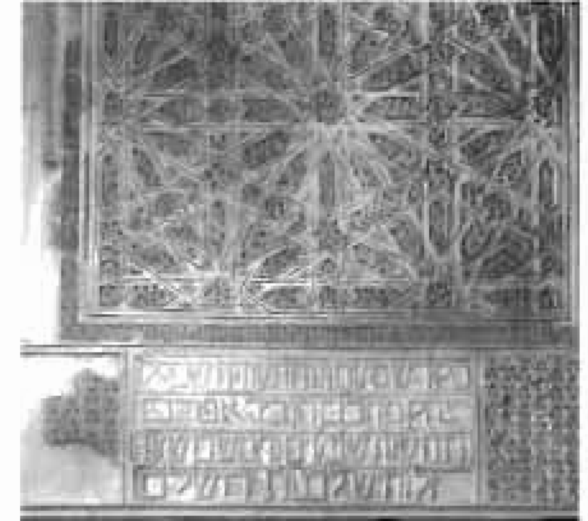


3. *Altneuschul*, Cross-Section, Prague, ca. 1260

4. *Synagogue*, Interior, Worms, 1134

5. *Menorah*, Lubeck Minster, 1436, copper alloy



6. Cordoba, Synagogue, *Wall with Dedicatory Inscription*, 1314/5

7. Cordoba, Synagogue, detail: Dedicatory Inscription, 1314/5

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ing them from the remains of the Temple in Jerusalem, without necessitating the hardships of a long and dangerous journey. They affirmed the value of the diaspora.

This paper has discussed architectural features of the medieval synagogue that transformed it into a *mikdash me'at*, a lesser sanctuary, symbolically linked to the Herodian Temple. The Amora'im (the sages) of the talmudic period (250–600) had drawn other links between the two institutions. They said that the order of the synagogue liturgy was analogous to the order of sacrifices in the Temple, an analogy repeated by Maimonides in the twelfth century;[29] that a contribution to the synagogue was analogous to a sacrificial offering; and that it is forbidden to destroy any part of the synagogue, because it was forbidden to tear down any part of the Temple. These earlier equations between Temple and synagogue reinforced the architectural references explicated by late medieval rabbis and assured the medieval Jew of God's presence in his synagogue, a building that embodied both the architectural and spiritual traditions of the Jerusalem Temple.

A similar process occurred in the Church during those periods when it was difficult to go on pilgrimages to the holy sites in Jerusalem. There were buildings whose architecture was modelled on the ancient and famous shrines of Jerusalem. An alternative process allowed the identification of sites in Europe with those in the Holy Land through the reinterpretation of the landscape of the European shrine by literary means: by incorporating references to biblical passages and pilgrims' descriptions of Jerusalem.[30] The process of copying the places associated with the life and passion of Jesus and the reinterpretation of older sacred sites created substitutes for the *loci sancti* of Jerusalem that were near at hand.

Archaeological Fact and Medieval Tradition in Christian, Islamic and Jewish Art, ed. Joseph Gutmann (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), p. 58.

[29] On the comparison of the liturgy to Temple sacrifices, see: Rashi on Berakhot, 26b and Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, 1:5; on the analogy of synagogue contributions to sacrifices, see BT, Baba Bathra, Tosefot on 8a, '*yahib*'; and on the prohibition against destroying a synagogue, see BT, Megillah, 28a. For later sources that cite the prohibition against 'tearing down', see Ezekiel Ha-levi Grubner, 'A Review of the Sources', *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*, ed. Baruch Litvin, 2nd ed. (New York, 1962), p. 214.

[30] See John Charles Arnold, 'Arcadia Becomes Jerusalem: Angelic Caverns and Shrine Conversion at Monte Gargano', *Speculum*, 75,3 (2000), especially, pp. 581–88.

Recent scholarship on Islamic architecture indicates that the imitation of distinctive elements of previous religious buildings occurred as early as the Umayyad period (661–750), predating the Christian and Jewish practices we have discussed. The earliest mosques are no longer viewed as mere mélanges of late antique elements, but as buildings that incorporate original symbolism. Estelle Whelan reinterpreted the first semicircular mihrab, that in the Mosque of the Prophet at Medina (in the part of the building reconstucted by al-Walid in 707–709), as the point toward which Muhammad had faced when leading prayers.[31] The semicircular niche became a powerful symbol of the prophet's life in Medina that was repeated in later buildings. Similarly, Finbarr B. Flood has explained the black disk found on the Umayyad mihrab beneath the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem as a representation of the onyx marking the place where Muhammad prayed in the Ka'ba mosque of Mecca.[32] Like the onyx, the black disk in Jerusalem served to commemorate the prophet's performance of the prayer ritual. This imitation of a feature of the Mecca shrine was followed by the building of mosques imitating the specific form of the Ka'ba Mosque, either by repeating an architectural form or the dimensions of the model, the same means later adopted by Jews and Christians when copying a holy site.

One need hardly emphasise the centrality of shrines in Jerusalem to the architectural copies of all three monotheistic religions and to consider what that focus, among other causes, augured for history.

[31] Estelle Whelan, 'The Origins of the *Miḥrāb Mujawwaf*: A Reinterpretation', *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 18(1986), pp. 214–17.

[32] Finbarr B. Flood, 'Light in Stone. The Commemorarion of the Prophet in Umayyad Architecture', *Bayt al-Maqdis. Jerusalem and Early Islam*, ed. Jeremy Johns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 319 and n. 59.

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