

The Meaning of Landscape in Classical Arabo-Muslim Culture

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Summary: This article explores the concept of landscape in Arabo-Muslim culture from a linguistic and literary standpoint¹. Based on extracts from historical collections produced by Arab geographers of the classical period, it shows the existence of spatial landscape models and stereotypes that served to situate a place in a landscape. The landscapes are found to be defined on visual, aesthetic and sensory criteria.

Key words: lexicology, landscape, Muslim culture

A constant feature of human culture is a capacity to absorb extremely varied influences. At different times in history, the Christian West and Muslim East have established relations and influenced each other. The common core to both Muslim and Western science is the scientific legacy of Ancient Greece². The series of studies and translations of Greek scientific works, begun in the Omayyad and Abbasid era at the end of the eighth century, and continued in Spain (Cordoba) in the twelfth century, proved valuable for Christian Europe between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries³. It is therefore not surprising to see a formulation of landscape emerge at the start of the fifteenth century in the West. It was a logical process consequent on the transmission, assimilation and renewal of the philosophy and science of the Ancient world. At the end of a long and complex process, Western culture formulated its theories and interpretations of landscape, and directed them in a way that gave a central place to the visual and scene-setting aspects. This new concept entered the Muslim world during the colonial period and helped to modify the relationship between Arab societies and nature.

Social science research, both in France and in other European countries, has elaborated theories about the social and aesthetic construction of landscape. A body of knowledge regarding the place of the image and landscape, on linguistic as well as philosophical and social planes, has developed. Some theories argue that the system of landscape representation and its recomposition in the West differ from that in other civilizations. One of the theories of A. Berque uses landscape to classify civilizations, depending on whether or not they adopt the criteria defined by western culture⁴. For a culture to be "*paysagère*" (literally "of landscape") it must satisfy the following four empirical criteria of possessing:

1- One or several words for "landscape".

¹ See Latiri Lamia, "La mise en paysage des systèmes d'irrigation dans les oasis du sud tunisien", Thèse de Université, Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne, vol. 1 and vol. 2, 1999.

² See J. Vernet, *Ce que la culture doit aux arabes d'Espagne*, Trans. Gabriel Martinez Gros, Sindbad, 1989. See J. B. Coustou, *Arabe et humanisme dans la France des derniers Valois*, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1989.

³ See E. Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, Preface by Alain de Libera, Series "Dédale". Maisonneuve et Larose, 1997.

⁴ "Moreover, some great civilizations, such as India or Islam, have apprehended and judged their environment in terms that cannot be reduced to the notion of landscape. In reality, the word landscape, landscape paintings, the aesthetic and moral exaltation of landscape are particular phenomena, of which most cultures contain no example". See A. Berque, 1990, *Médiance, de milieux en paysages*, Montpellier, Elysée Reclus.

- 2 - A literature (oral or written) describing landscapes or extolling their beauty.
3. - Pictorial representations of landscapes.
4. - Pleasure gardens.

How do these four criteria apply in Classical Arabo-Muslim culture?

1. The concept of landscape in the Arabic language

Arabic has two words to denote landscape, *Mandhar* and *Machhad*. In addition, as in French, these two terms can denote both the object and its representation. It would seem, however, that the word *Mandhar* is older than *Machhad*. It occurs in practically all the texts by Muslim geographers from the end of the eighth century. Regarding the word *Machhad*, some translators put its appearance at around the seventeenth century; but there is evidence of it occurring earlier, in the *Lisan*⁵, as well as in a geographical text by Tijani dating from the fourteenth century⁶. He left the following account from his journey in the Djerid:

“(...) the esplanade or panorama (*Moutafarijouhum*, *moutafarijet*, of *tafaraja*, and of *chahada*) is at a place known by the name of “*Bab al-Manchar*”⁷ and is a most attractive sight, for it is here that the water collects before subdividing as already described. It is here too that the laundresses (*kassarun*) spread out the spotlessly white linen and other coloured and embroidered garments over the whole surface of the square. To the onlooker it gives the impression of a bed of flowers and water at his feet. Nothing at Tozeur is more attractive than this place situated outside the forest (...)”.

Arabic lexicology of landscape

From the *al-Mounged* French-Arabic dictionary, we learn that:

the word landscape is translated by *Mandhar barri*: earthly landscape, pl. *manadhir*. *Mandhar rifi*: country landscape. *Mandhar bahri*: nautical landscape. *Mandhar tabi'i*: natural landscape. It is always followed by a qualifying adjective to specify the type of landscape being observed: *Mandhar tarikhi*: historical landscape. *Mandhar mi'mari*: urban landscape, and so on. The notion of panorama is rendered by *Machhad-Am*, “general view”. The background of an image or scene is translated by *Ka'-al-Mandhar*.

In the *Lisan*, the synonyms of *Mandhar* are *Machhad* and *Khalawi*: to look admiringly. The word *khamawi/khalawat*, is the established expression denoting literally: a place to withdraw to, somewhere with no inhabitants, devoid of all human presence. It evokes a subjective reality. The word *Mandhar* derives from the verb *Nadhara*: to look, to see. *Al-Nadharu*: *Hisu al-ayni*, *nadharuhu*, vision, sight, the sensitivity of the eye, its regard, its vision. Note that the verb *nadhara* is the source of another philosophical and theological meaning with the *nadhar*⁸: in addition to its concrete meaning of look, it has a technical meaning of the look of understanding: speculative thought, the working of the intellect (*'aql*). Here we are in the

⁵ *Lisan al-Arab*, Arabic Dictionary, 20 vols. Cairo, 1299-1308H [shelf-mark?] (1879-1888).

⁶ “Les pérégrinations de Tijani”, based on author’s translation. Les Editions officielles de Tunis, 1958, pp. 157–163. It was between 1306 and 1309 that al-Tijani journeyed to Tozeur (southern Tunisia).

⁷ The name of this gate evokes the activities practised there, namely the laundering of linen. It is the equivalent of the washing place of laundresses in the West. *Manchar*: washing place, drying ground.

⁸ It can also be spelt with “th”: *nathar*. See Latiri, vol. 1, p. 92.

domain of “judicative”⁹ reasoning, which elaborates and discerns the logical validity of statements and seeks understanding through mental processes. The *nadhara* belongs in the conceptual sphere.

al-Mandharu: *ma nadharta ileyhi fa a’jabaka aw asa’aka, al-chay’ al-lathi yu’jibu al-nadhara itha nadhara ileyhi wa yasuruhu*, meaning literally: what you have looked at and has aroused your admiration or displeasure, the object that pleases the observer when he looks at it and that makes him happy, contented.

al-Mandharatu: *mawka’fi ra’s al-jabal fihi rakib yandhuru am-‘aduwi, yahrusuhu, al-mandharatu, al-markabatu*. A place at the top of the mountain, from where a guard can see the enemy and keep watch; the observation point, the mountain pass.

This terminology introduces, first, the actual idea of landscape, since there is an awareness and a detachment in relation to what one is looking at, which is denoted by the term *nadhara*; second, a regard guided by an aesthetic appreciation, which is the meaning of *al-Mandharu*; and third, the existence of a high point, *al-Mandharatu*, which allows a distancing in relation to the space being observed.

In the Arabic version of *al-Mounged*, the word *mafraj*¹⁰ is a term used in architecture to denote the top floor of a building, which gives a view of the horizon. Another highly significant word is *tafarij*: *futuhah, tafarij al-kiba’wal darabazin wa ma-achbaha, khurukuha*: openings in cupolas where the parapets evoke the capacity to see through, from within the frame formed by its structures. This signifies that one is at a high point from where it is possible to take in the landscape, whatever its nature, which presents itself to the observer. In its use, this word reinforces the term *mafraj*. The notions of *al-mandharatu* and *tafarij* both emphasize the framed space: an element reconstructed by a visual analysis, that is, a significative delimitation of the observed space.

In its original meaning, *mandhar* denotes what the eye sees, beautiful or ugly, without limitation, and with reference to a space or to an object that can be a mountain summit or some other elevated point. The word *machhad*¹¹ also evokes landscape but with a second meaning, that of scene. This meaning is very characteristic in miniatures: the figures seem to be performing roles. The landscape is the scene in which the action takes place. This hypothesis arises because the name *Mouchahid*, spectator, is derived from the verb *Chahada*: to be a witness of something. This suggests that one is watching a *spectacle* that could be a natural environment.

The definition of the two terms tells us that the words *Mandhar* and *Machhad* do not imply any technical referent associated with pictorial representation, unlike the word *paysage (landscape)*¹² as studied by A. Roger (1978). The Arabic words for country, land, region, territory, are unrelated¹³, and there is no link between the word *baled* (country) and

⁹ See Guy Monnot, *Islam et religions*, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986, p. 98.

¹⁰ The term is still widely used today in Yemen, and has not undergone any change of meaning. In a Yemeni house, the ground floor is stabling, the first floor is for the old women, the second floor for the old men, and the next floor is the *mafraj*, the incontestable domain of the patriarch.

¹¹ *Machhad* is also the name of a city in Iran, probably because of the quality of the site.

¹² See Latiri, *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 344.

¹³ The synonym of the word *ufuq* is *qutr*, which denotes a region or a land, *l’mara* denotes cultivated land and the word *Biled* pl. *Bulden* denotes the country (“pays”).

Machhad/Mandhar, of the kind seen in French with *Pays/Paysage* through the addition of the suffix “age”.

“L’artialisation du paysage” (Landscape into art)¹⁴

The notion of landscape in Arabic thus expresses a concept that articulates two distinct but inseparable notions. One is an “objective” reality; the other is a “subjective” reality. In the former case, it is an area of space offered to the eye. In the second case, it draws on aesthetics. The words *mandhar* and *machhad* come from verbs (*nadhara*, *chahada*), which emphasize the vision of a space without regard to its size or to the influence on it of man. In either case, the notion refers to a medium of perception. This is its material or perceptible aspect. In any landscape there is a site, a place or a country, constitutive elements that can be subjected to analysis. The Arabic definition introduces two aspects: the spectacle, which can involve nature, urban settlements, everyday life, and also aesthetics, since this space may please or displease the observer. In addition, the word *khalawi* reinforces the notion of contemplation since it suggests a space that is favourable to meditation.

In both situations, landscape in Arabic requires an observer and a regard that fixes upon it, before it can be made material. A site must first be seen before it can be called *mandhar* or *machhad*. This point is supported by comments of Ibn Battuta¹⁵, who from the Abu Kobaïs mountain dominating the sanctuary of Mecca and the rest of the city wrote: “(...) from this point, one discovers the beauty of Mecca, the magnificence of the Temple, its expanse and the revered *ca’bah*”¹⁶. In another passage, concerning the Nadjd country, the author relates: “it is a vast plateau stretching as far as the eye can see. We breathed its sweet and fragrant zephyr (...) also this cupola is one of the most marvellous constructions of the world. From whatever direction you approach the city, you can see it rising into space and dominating all the other buildings”¹⁷. The landscape is thus a place that the eye isolates and contemplates. It becomes a selection of objects among those that present themselves to the gaze, which are viewed as components of landscapes only when the totality that is seen pleases or displeases.

At the end of the twelfth century, the Granadan poet Al-Gharnaty¹⁸ alluded to the importance of viewpoints for gazing upon a landscape, and speaking of the locality of Hamah,¹⁹ wrote the following few lines: “May God preserve the viewpoints which border the city of Hamah, on them I have focused my hearing, my thoughts and my sight”.

The first point to make is that the notion of landscape indicates a category of thought that is culturally and historically determined. In these accounts, landscapes are appreciated, first, on visual criteria, and second, on sensorial criteria by which the perceptual operation of the environment is amplified and described.

¹⁴ The notion of “artialisation”, i.e. becoming a work of art, comes from A. Roger (1991), by which he meant that for landscape to be produced a double action is necessary: artialisation in situ and in visu.

¹⁵ Ibn Battuta, a maghrebin geographer of the fourteenth century. See the three volumes of *Les Voyages d’Ibn Battutat*, La Découverte, 1994.

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 309.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 353, and the description of the mosque of Damascus, p. 214.

¹⁸ 1214-1286, geographer, historian, literary critic, originating from Granada. He journeyed in the East between 1240 and 1254. See Ibn Battuta, pp. 177.

¹⁹ City that formed an independent sultanate under Egyptian sovereignty, governed by a branch of the Ayyoubide family.

In the West, the earliest notion of landscape refers to a pictorial work that contributes to the construction of mental images and to the stereotypes that inform models of landscape, but in the Arabo-Muslim world there is no reference to models from painting. In fact, nearly all the Muslim models of landscape are implicit in Arabic geographical writing and poetry, for the simple reason that there is no other means of describing reality available to this culture. Landscape is first of all a necessary conjunction between an object of the world and its interception by the mind and the other senses, so that it can exist and acquire material form, and here the notion of *nadhar* assumes its full meaning, through the analysis of perceptible visual data, and the distancing of the subject relative to the object. This point is essential: it signifies that before the Western Renaissance, Arabo-Muslim man knew how to establish a distance between himself, the subject, and the observed reality, the object, a distance which arguably is the very essence of modernity.

The second point to make is that the concept evoked by the words *machhad/mandhar/khalawi*, expresses the portion of a space, or a fragment of the sensible world, under the effect of a mentally directed gaze and of an aesthetic judgment. This aesthetic judgment reveals that it is no longer just any space, but a particular space, with its own characteristics, which, in setting the scene, make it a landscape. Because this idea can convey either beauty or ugliness, it allows the characteristic of the place to be defined. Ugliness can be due to feelings of fear, as for example the '*aqaba*²⁰ characteristic of mountainous areas, suggesting the difficulty of the crossing, or the *yahma*²¹ alluding to the implacable nature of the desert. Similarly, fear can confer sublimity (*tasaû'd, sumu', faîq, rai'un*) on a place and make it a landscape, in the same way that the beauty of a site gives it the status of landscape by transgression of the same referents. An account related by Sakati, in a story set in tenth-century Spain²², illustrates our point: "(...) the man led him, accompanied by a servant who drove the mule. The woman did not climb a hill or hillock, or follow a valley or ravine, without showing her admiration for the landscape that spread out before her eyes, something which filled the man with growing delight and joy (...)"²³.

Use of the words *machhad/mandhar* implies that three parameters are associated with them:

1. A medium for perception, (a condition always satisfied once there is perception, whether in Arabo-Muslim culture or in Western culture. Something can be seen only if it is looked at, the result of a visual analysis). It may be added that the perceptual operation includes the other senses (hearing, smell, etc.) and is not concentrated exclusively on sight, as the accounts quoted from prove. In his article "*Symbolique et matérialité du paysage*" ("Symbolism and materiality of landscape"), Y. Luginbühl stresses the attention which must be given to the "multi sensorial dimension of landscape", which could be used to "establish a connection with the materiality of landscape"²⁴.

2. A perceiving subject, individual or collective, whose imagination contains the representation of the landscape and who, as a result of this, has the ability to enclose a portion

²⁰ '*Aqaba*, mountain pass. See L. Latiri, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 99.

²¹ One of the names given to the desert. See Latiri, *ibid.*, p. 111.

²² See G. S. Colin and Lévy-Provençal, *Un manuel hispanique de hisba, glossaire*, s. v., pp. 47 sqq. On the slave trade in Muslim Spain.

²³ See Lévy-Provençal, 1996, *L'Espagne musulmane, au Xe siècle. Institutions et vie sociale*, Maisonneuve et Larose, pp. 192-3.

²⁴ Y. Luginbühl, 1998, "Symbolique et matérialité du paysage", *Revue de l'Economie Méridionale (Lepaysage entre Culture et Nature)*, 3, vol. 46, no. 183.

of the sensible world within the limits of a frame by attributing a general significance to the elements assembled therein.

3. An infinitely varied list of stereotypes or models, able to assure the qualification of all the spectacles of the sensible world likely to be contained within the gaze and isolated. After an instantaneous analysis, these spectacles may or may not possess the status of landscape, with a value and relating to the mental representations.

2. Literary representations

Literary representations of nature abound in Arabo-Muslim culture. It is not unusual for poets to produce writings on landscape, such as the poems of Sanawbari (c. 945)²⁵ who devotes much space to evocations of nature, with celebrations of a landscape, a garden, a flower, etc. So pronounced is this aspect, both in the subject matter and the quantity produced, that he is considered the poet of nature. His poems are referred to as floral (*nawriya*)²⁶. This literary representation of nature already existed in the poems of Virgil, *The Bucoliques* (42–39 B.C.), and it occurs again in the sixteenth century in those of Ronsard and Du Bellay, both of whom celebrated the beauty of landscape.

The profusion of literary texts about nature made it possible to construct several models of landscape which have different values depending on the context and the goal pursued. Classical Arabic geographical literature has been found to contain at least five models of earthly landscapes²⁷, some examples of which are given here²⁸.

* utilitarian landscape

One of the first points to note is that the interest of Arabo-Muslim geographers for a space is primarily utilitarian²⁹. This is what A. Miquel refers to as “*paysage utile*” (“useful landscape”)³⁰. This is one of the most common and oldest ways of apprehending space in the history of humanity. Or at least it is the first to be identified by historians, who have perhaps neglected the other dimensions. It can be used to analyse, for example, the rural space as a set of places differentiated by use. The **geographical settings** are distinguished by their capacity to grow an abundance of agricultural produce. In classical Arabic geographical writing, the recurring expression for fertile land, *ard khasba*, or indeed the general term for wealth,

²⁵ He was the court poet for the Hamdanides of Alep. See A. Miquel, *Du désert d'Arabie aux jardins d'Espagne*, Seuil, 1992.

²⁶ See E. Lévy-Provençal, *L'Espagne musulmane*, op. cit. See L. Latiri, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 166.

²⁷ Regarding maritime and river spaces, I have identified a number of landscape models, by examining a corpus of disparate writings. The representations associated with these spaces have not yet been the object of an in-depth research.

²⁸ For landscape models with strong religious connotations, there is the mountain, the desert and the countryside in some of its aspects. For fantastic spaces, the models are associated with the mountain and desert areas, etc. See Latiri, vol. 1, pp. 128-173.

²⁹ Utilitarianism concerns not only what the land produces but also its function of instrument of conquest. In his article “*paysagisme*”, G. Sautter notes that describing landscapes is tantamount to waging war. He may well be correct, since the description of territories is also part of military strategy, and is useful to the monarch and considered as a policy instrument. In Muslim geography it comes under a special heading, administrative geography, which was also created with expansionist goals.

³⁰ See A. Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du Xie siècle: le milieu Naturel*, EHSS, 1980.

khayrat, is enough to present a place in a positive light³¹. In this literature, the coexistence of the paired terms fertile land (*ard khasba*) and barren land (*ard kahila*) assumes the specificity of an area. The former indicates abundance and an inexhaustible supply of foodstuffs, a sort of Cockaigne where everyone can eat as much as they want. The latter is often described in negative terms: land that is infertile, desert, arid, unable to produce the smallest amount of greenery. The models given by the Arab geographers of the period, such as the peripheral regions of the great deserts, the plains regions, and some mountain regions, are types that reveal the parsimony and harshness of nature. They group these regions under the neologism of “land unfit for cultivation”—*ghayr saliha lil zira’a*. Their preference is for humanized and domesticated landscapes where the milieu is valued for its resources and wealth. But this does not preclude the attribution of other values to these spaces. The differentiation of places involves an approach other than the utilitarian one. Muslim geographers attributed to space a wide range of uses and values unrelated to utility. Some descriptions of countries, territories, plants, etc. are of this type.

* The Landscape of Paradise and the art of Islamic gardens

On the intellectual plane, the model of Paradise is a constant in virtually all cultural traditions. Like many other cultures, Islam has attempted to reproduce this model as defined by the Koran. The Muslim caliphs created gardens and palaces whose clear purpose was pleasure and happiness in this world, and which had a large space set aside for contemplation and meditation. Muslim models of landscape looked to Paradise for their structure³². The garden is conceived as a microcosm into which is projected the idea of Paradise.

The art of Muslim gardens, inherited from pre-Islamic knowledge, is a reality inspired by the model of paradise, if not of Eden. The earliest archaeological traces date from 730. A detailed description exists of the gardens of the caliph Al-Muqtadir, dated 917, in which more than a third of the land enclosed by the city’s fortifications was occupied by mansions surrounded by gardens.³³ There are two conceptions of gardens, however, in Islam: gardens created for the pleasure of sovereigns or the aristocratic class, adjoining the palaces such as the *muniya* and seigneurial residences such as the *Rahal* and the *Day’a*; and gardens created for feeding the people, like the *qura*. Love gardens and magic gardens, meanwhile, are common literary themes and serve as the backdrop for stories. They have an important role in romantic encounters, such as that between the poet Mutanabi and Wallada, sister of the sovereign Sayf al Dawla³⁴. Several writings offer an inside view of this remarkable space that has been described and depicted by poets and lovers, agronomists and geographers³⁵.

³¹ See the article by M. V. Ozouf-Marignier, in *Du milieu à l’Environnement: L’environnement vu par les notables locaux à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, p. 72.

³² The first idea for a garden representing a part of paradise goes back to a conception directly dictated by the Prophet at the start of his mission in Mecca. It is a logical continuation of an older Judaeo-Christian notion of Eden. Over and above the highly literary idea of a cultivated space marked by divine felicity, the Prophet laid down rules regarding the organization of gardens, their floral components and how they should be enjoyed. The themes he expounded had a profound influence on believers in their perception and conception of space and nature, and hence in their realizations.

³³ See B. E. MacDougall and R. Ettinghausen, *The Islamic Garden*, Dunbarton Oaks Colloquium on the history of landscape architecture, 1976. L. Latiri, *ibid*, p. 173.

³⁴ A sovereign of the Hamdanide epoch (915-967), who protected poets and allowed Mutanabi to practice his art in the court.

³⁵ Clearly this was not a Muslim specificity. See M. Mosser and G. Teyssot, *L’architecture des jardins d’Occident*, Electa, Milan, 1990. G. Gromort, *L’art des jardins*, Ch. Massin, Paris, n.d.

Lévy-Provençal's work³⁶ on tenth-century Muslim Spain mentions a highly characteristic representation of landscape:

“The agricultural development of the Peninsular under Muslim domination was responsible for creating, even among city-dwellers, a very pronounced taste for the countryside and gardens, as is attested by many sources. The Moors of Spain all had a similar cast of mind, a very strong and completely genuine sense of nature, which found expression in a large body of poetical literature, sometimes in lines of great beauty. At the end of the tenth century, so-called floral (nawriya) poems were greatly in vogue, and celebrated the beauty and fragrance of the roses, myrtle, violets, daffodils, narcissi and wallflowers³⁷ of the gardens of Cordoba.³⁸ Country houses were numerous throughout the Guadalquivir valley and around the large cities, where they provided a welcome escape from the noise and bustle of urban life. There one could delight in the contemplation of harmoniously composed landscapes, in the shade of great trees and in the coolness brought by running water”.

The Granadan poet Ibn Luyûn³⁹ indicates how to lay out a house in the country, in very characteristic lines that at times recall passages from *The Georgiques*: “When building your house in your garden, he says,⁴⁰ you should choose the dominant point from which defence and look out can best be kept. It should face south, with the door to the side, and the position of the well and washing area⁴¹ should be slightly raised; or better still, instead of a well have a conduit of water running through the shade. By the washing area, plant banks of greenery, of all the varieties that delight the eye, and further away plant mixed flowers and evergreen trees. Vines will be planted to bound the estate, while in the centre arbours will shade the pathways that encircle the flowerbeds as with a border. In the middle, for the hours of rest, build a kiosk that is open on all sides; surround it with climbing roses, myrtle and all the flowers that give a garden its beauty; make it longer than it is wide, so that its contemplation does not tire the eye. At the very bottom, a building will be set aside for the guests who come to visit the master of the place; it will have its door, its washing area concealed from afar by a grove of trees. Adding a dovecote and a habitable tower will only make it more agreeable”. This document can easily be compared to certain texts by Latin authors such as Virgil and Lucretius, or to the books of rural husbandry from the Middle Ages, and to that by R. L. de Girardin regarding the layout of the garden and its architectural characteristics, the organization of the various constituent elements and the pleasure they can give.

The poet gives the ideal characteristics of the site for establishing the residence and gardens by according an important role to relief. The high point has an essential place in the overall structure, since from the beginning it is presented as the condition for the success of the project. Perspective is suggested by the dimensions of the kiosk, whose length gives the depth necessary for a vista of a distant horizon. The south-facing position refers to the situation of

³⁶ E. Lévy-Provençal, *L'Espagne musulmane*, op. cit., pp. 174-5.

³⁷ In Spain many flowers or aromatic plants still have names of Arabic origin. For instance: *albahaca* (by transposition of the Arabic *al-habaqa*, basil); *azucena* (Arabic: *as-saoussan*, lily); *alhucema* (Arabic: *al-khuzama*, lavender); *jazmin* (Arabic: *yasmin*, jasmine), etc. In addition, the Arabic word for flower bed, *ar-riyadh*, has been retained in Andalusia in the form of *arriate* to denote “a flower border along a wall”.

³⁸ According to Lévy-Provençal, several instances can be found in Ibn 'Idâri, Bayan, III, p. 18 sqq. See also R. Blachère, *Sa 'id de Bagdad*, in *Hespéris*, X, 1930, p. 32.

³⁹ On this author, born at Almeria in 1282, died in 1349, see the references quoted by E. Lévy-Provençal, *Les manuscrits arabes de Rabat*, 1921, p. 21, no. 58.

⁴⁰ The Arabic text of this part of the didactic poem of Ibn Luyûn is based on the manuscript in the University of Granada library, by Lerchundi and Simonet, *Crestomatia arabigo-espagnola*, Grenade, 1881, pp. 136-7.

⁴¹ In Arabic: *Sihrig* (Hisp. *saharig*). This word survives in Catalan in the form of *safareix*, with the meaning of wash house. For more details, see Lévy-Provençal, *ibid*.

the site in relation to the sun and light necessary to acclimatize the plants. In a few strongly rhythmical lines, Ibn Luyûn gives the essential foundations for producing a perfect garden that satisfies contemporary aesthetics and is a source of positive value. Examples abound and show that no geographical situation is excluded, beauty being the common denominator of the sites and surroundings identified as ideals.

The number of terms used by geographers such as Ibn Hawqal, Muqqadassi, Faqih, and others creates a vocabulary commensurate with the riches and variety of nature. For the perfumed garden, for instance, there are no fewer than ten words to denote the regions of sweet perfume. All are in the East and include Palestine, Yemen, the Iranian plateau, High Mesopotamia, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Fars, and Muslim India. Their descriptions represent evocations of Paradise. The garden where Muqqadassi walked and breathed in the scent of narcissi is enveloped with the powerful scent of jasmine, mingled with the fragrance of the orange trees; and here, where Ibn Hawqal praised the wild carpet of double flowers stretching as far as the eye can see, around a caravanserai on the steppe. On the region of Bukhara, Ibn Hawqal has left the following account: “*After Bukhara, following the Zeravshan valley, one sees, to the left and the right, a country that is cultivated continuously as far as the Buttam mountains. The vegetation extends for eight days without a break, its splendour, a patchwork of vegetable gardens, greenery, gardens and meadows, set with rivers that never run dry; in the centre of this countryside, pools keep trees and crops green, where they stretch out on either side of the river. Beyond this green line, still on each side of the river, lie fields, themselves protected at their furthest extent by pastures and castles. From each city and from each town, a fortress shines out from the midst of this greenery—one would say a green brocade, striped by the spring water and embroidered with rows of castles. It is the most magnificent of God’s lands*”. The landscape described gives free rein to the imagination and to escapism. The presence of unbroken greenery is one of the aesthetic conditions of the landscape of the countryside. In the field of representations the countryside possesses a double symbolism: paradisiac, by reference to divine creation, and bucolic, by the idyllic setting it offers.

Ibn Battuta relates that Ibn Jubayr uses the poem of an elder to speak of Cairo/Misr:

*I swear it by thine life: Misr
is not misr⁴², but
is the earthly paradise
for any thoughtful person.
Its children are its angels
and its dark-eyed daughters, the houris.
Its island of Raudhah is the
garden, and the Nile is the river
Cauther.⁴³*

Also on the subject of Cairo, Nâcir eddin writes:

The shore of Misr is a

⁴² *Misr*: Cairo, and *misr*: a great city.

⁴³ It will be noted that these verses are rich in paradisiacal allusions contained in the Koran: “Immortal youths shall wait upon them [the chosen] with bowls and ewers, and cups full of the purest wine”, (LVI, 17-18). “And for wives we shall give them dark-eyed houris”. (XLIV, 54). Cauther is the river of Paradise, the latter being compared to the Isle of Rhodah, a pleasure site in Cairo. Ibn Battuta, *ibid.*, pp. 21.

*paradise that no other city
can equal;
Especially since it has been
graced by the Nile with water
in plenty.
Winds blow
its waves into links of chain mail,
That the file of their David
has not touched⁴⁴.
Its fluid temperature causes
to tremble the man
lightly clad.
Its vessels, like
the celestial spheres, do
nothing but go up and
go down.*

The bucolic landscape

In the register of bucolic landscapes⁴⁵, the most prized settings are fertile plains, oases, which are seldom separated from the same aesthetic qualifiers applied to valleys and hillsides. Conversely, the landscapes that carry low value are those of the craggy mountains, uncultivated land, and irremediable deserts⁴⁶. This attribution of positive or negative aesthetic value to space is part of a culturalist vision of place: *their beauty and their charms contribute to their identifying image*. The works of Arab geography reflect a liking and taste for cities and their surrounding countryside. The quality of architecture and urban layout⁴⁷ also gives rise to many allusions which reflect the interest for perception of the environment, whether it be immediate, such as intra-urban spaces, or nearby, like the countryside. They are revealing of the notions of *sites* and of *situations*. Criteria of salubrity, aesthetics and economics are combined to designate spaces that are open, accessible and well supplied, as the ideal spatial types. Populous cities are considered positive in the process of evaluating a place: *“It possesses fine markets which bring together the foodstuffs of a profitable production, and the various trades; it contains a large population, and groups of palm trees line it both within and without, so that the houses are situated between them. There is a large bridge, built on boats joined together and stretched between the two banks. Iron chains go round them on each side and are attached at each end to a large beam firmly fixed on the shore.”*⁴⁸

Enumeration of the *misr*, *qura* and *biled* is part of the classic procedure for describing places and reveals the degree of interest for populous localities. Spaces without any human presence are strongly criticized. A contrast is made between cultivation and wilderness, and contributes

⁴⁴ Koran, XXI, 80. “We have taught him [David] for you how to make chain mail”.

⁴⁵ The adjective bucolic is translated in Arabic by *ra’aii* and has pastoral connotations as in the West.

⁴⁶ See Latiri, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 99-128.

⁴⁷ Describing the merits of the inhabitants of Damascus, Ibn Battuta refers to the various expenditures of the city’s religious foundations and their contribution to its embellishment: “... those for maintaining the roads and paving the streets. In Damascus the latter have a pavement on each side for pedestrians to walk; horseriders take the central path”. Op. cit., p. 241. Note the differentiation of the spaces reserved for those on foot and for those on horseback.

⁴⁸ Description by Ibn Battuta of the small town of Hillah, founded in 1102 by Sheik Sadaqa bin Mazyed, as the centre of a small Arab principality. Thanks to this bridge over the branch of Hilla, the former branch of the Euphrates, it became an important post on the road from Baghdad to Hidjaz. Op. cit., p. 432.

to construction of an elitist landscape ideal, supporting the worldview of a prosperous and harmonious rural society⁴⁹. Ibn Battuta, for example, relating the opinions of Ibn Hawqal, writes: “*The Obolla canal is the largest canal in the region, it extends over four parasanges between Bassorah and Obolla, and both banks are lined with palaces, and orchards that touch as if to form a single orchard set out in a perfectly straight line, and there is an unbroken series of handsome sites, graceful summer houses, luxurious buildings, trees laden with fruit, delicious fruit, sweet-smelling plants so fresh they seem like living creatures, with large, well set out pools, and where strollers are always to be found enjoying these exquisite delights and where passers-by come and go.*”⁵⁰ Likewise, on the subject of Damascus: “*The people of Damascus do no work on Saturdays; instead they go to the places of pleasure, on the river banks and in the shade of great trees, between the flower gardens and running water, and there they stay all day, until night falls.*”⁵¹ Days off would thus seem not to be unique to our century, any more than are waterside picnics in rustic settings! Reproducing the comments of Ibn al-Jubayr about Damascus, Ibn Battuta adds: “*... But he did not describe the golden tones of its twilight, at the moment when the sun goes down, nor the times of its excited crowds, nor the periods of its renowned festivities ...*”.

From the description of rural space it becomes clear that the countryside is considered as a continuation of the garden but on the scale of the entire territory. The extent of the Muslim Empire and the cultural riches it encompassed allowed new ideas, new technical procedures, and new ways of organizing space to circulate within this vast territory. Indian, Persian and even Chinese influences were determinant in the creation of later landscapes. These new horizons played a vital role in the Muslim approach to imagining and representing landscape.

The invention of Muslim landscape in the Abbasid era is seen not just through its appearance in miniatures, literary works and such like, but also in the elaboration of projects for the creation of settlements and infrastructures. The new-towns of Islam, such as al-Zahra, Samarkand, Baghdad, Kairouan, Fez, built out of nowhere under the aegis of particular rulers, all belonged to this current. The translation of Greek scientific works, and the development of the natural sciences as they were understood between the eighth and eleventh centuries, were responsible for development of the evolutive and gradualist conception of landscapes, envisaged in the form of a particular spatial ideal. The account of Gharnaty bears out this view:

*“Make thine home at Djilik,
between the cup and the strings
of instruments, in a
garden that fills with
satisfaction the ear and eye.
Delight thine eyes by
contemplating its
beauties, and exercise thine intellect
between the flower-gardens and the
river;
Watch at Damascus the*

⁴⁹ See Y. Luginbühl, “Le rural pour penser la nature?”, in *Du Rural à l’Environnement*, p. 102.

⁵⁰ Ibn Battuta, op. cit., pp. 381-2. This is the former Roman city of Apologos which was on the site of the Ashar district of the present city of Basra. At the time of Ibn Battuta’s visit, only ruins were left, in which could still be seen the remains of castles that attested to its former splendour.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

*golden hues of the
evening, and listen to the melodies
of the birds in the trees.
And say to those who fault a
man for his pleasures:
Leave me, for, in my
eyes, thou art not a member
of the human race”.*

The appearance of the terms *landsturm*, *paysage*, etc. in the European languages, implies a desire to form a mental image of the aspect of the physical environment and to establish it as an object for contemplation and pleasure, and is a form of recognition of bucolic culture⁵². In Arabo-Muslim culture, it seems to be the desire to represent *Allah's Paradise* on earth, and to make the countryside similar to an *incommensurable garden*⁵³; a bucolic countryside, where harvests are plentiful and where harmony reigns between man and his surroundings.

Whereas in the West various types of gardens have emerged over time—the French garden, the English garden, etc.—the Muslim garden has been unchanging. No garden can be envisaged that is more beautiful than paradise, the perfect model that will never be superseded. By contrast, the use and social practice of nature can introduce and produce new models. With this approach it could be asked whether the bucolic is not constructed on a primordial reference, that of Eden, projected onto the territory (be this the countryside or a garden), to determine the idea of the value of cultivation, whose purpose is obviously economic.

Picturesque or bucolic

In the West, picturesque originally denoted what merited being painted; then, gradually, it became what surprised in the discovery of territories as regards what is peculiar to them. Hence it is rarity, the capacity to excite, which became the characteristics of the picturesque landscape. This model developed considerably in the eighteenth century and still more so in the nineteenth century, with the growth of tourist travel among the well-off sections of the bourgeoisie⁵⁴. Y. Luginbühl and N. Cadiou⁵⁵ relate that it was on the base of the term

⁵² Nathalie Cadiou and Y. Luginbühl, “Modèles paysagers et représentations du paysage en Normandie-Maine”, in *Paysage au Pluriel*, p. 22.

⁵³ Notion taken from B. Lassus, *Jardins imaginaires, les habitants paysagistes*, Presses de la Connaissance, Paris, 1984.

⁵⁴ N. Cadiou and Y. Luginbühl, *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ *Idem.*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ To avoid a realistic representation of nature, the work of God, the artist was subject to a number of rules which allowed him to represent the sensible world but include some unrealistic element, thus establishing his good faith in not seeking to imitate divine creation. See A. Papadopoulo, *ibid.* Latiri, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 36.

⁵⁷ See the description of the lighthouse, vol. 1, p. 94. In addition to the lighthouse, he describes the famous Column of pillars, known as Pompey's Pillar, as being one of the marvels of Alexandria: it is situated in the middle of a forest of palm trees, and it stands out from all these trees by its amazing height. It is in a single piece, artistically carved, and has been erected on bases of square stone that look like enormous platforms. p. 95.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For this place, see the same reference, pp. 236-40.

⁶⁰ See Latiri, *op. cit.* vol. 2, p. 438.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Massudi, *Les Prairies d'or*, muruj al-Thahab, vol. 3, p. 314, trad. Pellat, société asiatique, 1962.

“picturesque” that was founded this new model of landscape which brought together natural sites and historic places. In some passages in texts of Arabo-Muslim geography, however, picturesque often seems to be confused with bucolic. Travel, to remain with that example, certainly involved the Muslim bourgeoisie, but not exclusively so. Travel narratives, in particular, contain many passages where the landscape in question is halfway between the picturesque and the bucolic.

It seems that the Arabic definition of picturesque has undergone a contemporary readjustment relative to the Western definition. The *al-Mounged* dictionary (French-Arabic version) defines it as follows: Picturesque: (*taswiri, wasf, tarif*). *What is worthy of being painted (jadir bil-taswir, bil-rasm), garden, landscape (hadiqa: mandhar), original (tarif), attractive landscape (baha'), extraordinary site (rawa', mawqa')*. To our knowledge none of the descriptions given by Faqih, Massudi, Ibn Hawqal, Becri, etc. uses the adjective *taswiri* which refers to painting, from the root *sawwara/musawwir* about which many authors note the controversy and polemics over the role of the painter and God⁵⁶. All of them, however, at one point or another in their books, mention landscapes that are original or remarkable or both. This model seems to be associated with natural monuments and historical sites and places. It involves firstly depicting by metaphor, and this is the second meaning of *taswiri*, and describing (*wasf*) the place whose characteristics have moved them, distinguishing it if possible from the bucolic. Ruins, and the Seven Wonders of the World, for example, seem not to belong to the bucolic landscape, but they probably make up the skeletal structure of the picturesque landscape.

Ibn Battuta gives rich descriptions of historic sites, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The descriptions use literary images that he constructs by visiting the pyramids of the Pharaohs and the temples. He considers them as belonging to the Wonders of the World. So it is in the long passages concerning most of the ancient Iraqi and Syrian cities. Some of the descriptions are copied from the twelfth-century geographer Ibn al-Jubayr, who visited them in 1183-1184. The description of the lighthouse of Alexandria may also be taken from an early author⁵⁷. But the strength of Ibn Battuta is to have indicated during his visit their existence or disappearance. It seems that the descriptions are not focused solely on urban sites, ruins, their originality and their history, but on certain other places too. Emphasis is placed on their originality, their beauty and the pleasure they give by their singularity.

* The panoramic landscape

The panoramic model implies the view of a landscape from a summit from where the surrounding space can be seen in a 360-degree angle⁵⁸.

The Arabic definition concerning the panorama, *machhad 'am*, implies *al-mantharatu*, the place at the top of the mountain from where an overview of the observed space can be had: the observation post, the mountain pass. The major difference between the West and Islam on this point is that Western culture has made widespread use of viewpoint indicators and so-

⁶³ Papadopoulos, op. cit. See L. Latiri, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 41. For philosophical and theological reasons, Muslim artists were not allowed to imitate nature in its realistic aspects. This led them to produce flat representations, without shadows, etc.

⁶⁴ See Latiri, op. cit., pp. 55-75. Many illustrations show very characteristic landscapes.

called panoramic representations whereas Islam makes no use of these, except in literary contexts. As far as we are aware, and until proof to the contrary, Muslim miniatures contain no representations of panoramic landscapes.

Describing the hill of Kacioûn, Ibn Battuta writes: “*It is one of the finest viewpoints in the world and one of the most attractive pleasure spots*”(…) “*This hill dominates the gardens that surround the town, and its beauty and the variety of delights it offers to the eye are incomparable (...). The eyes are dazzled by the beauty of the whole, of its parts, of their movement. In sum, the hill’s grace and perfect beauty are beyond anything that can be expressed in a description.*”⁵⁹

***The fantastic landscape**

The word sublime has several synonyms in Arabic. In the *al-Mounged* French-Arabic dictionary: sublime⁶⁰: *faiq, samy, nabil, ra’i’, mutasai’d/tasa’ud*: sublimation, elevation. In the *al-Mounged* Arabic dictionary: *ra’a: faza’a, fahwa rai’un wa rawi’un*, afraid, terrified, sick at heart. But the term *rai’un* has a second meaning, it can have the sense of: to please, what pleases you by the beauty of its aspect and its courage, *raw’an, ra’ahu al-amru, a’jabahu, rawa-’a: ism min al-arwa’a, wahwa al-lathi yu’jibuka bi-husnihi aw chaja’atihi*.

Sublime landscape as conceived in the West during the eighteenth century carried with it the idea that nature can be mastered, that any obstacle can be overcome through man’s technical skill and superiority⁶¹. This model is explicitly present in Muslim thought in connection with the desert environment and some aspects of the mountain environment. Use of the term sublime, however, in its Western sense, is incorrect for the Muslim culture of this period, since the sense of fear was not totally overcome. Some aspects of the mountain and desert areas are much more identified with poetical and fantastical representations, and while the conquest of these elements of course transforms them into a sublime environment, this is the case only if the fantastical, represented by the entities, which haunt the desert, is mastered. The text by Massudi is on the frontier between the fantastical and the sublime. He writes:⁶² “*There is a host of legends about the goules, shaytan, marids, djinns, qutrub and udar. The latter name designates one of these diabolical species. The udar appears in the most isolated areas of Yemen and the deserts, and in the highest cantons of Upper Egypt. Sometimes it walks behind humans and sodomizes them. The victims’ anus then becomes infested with worms and they die. On other occasions it appears before men and terrifies them. When a man in one of the aforementioned regions has been the target of the animal’s actions, his fellow countrymen ask him whether he has been abused or merely received a bad fright. In the former case he is considered hopeless, but if he has just suffered a fright he will shortly get over his distress and recover. For it has to be said that as soon as a man sees this monster he falls unconscious. Yet there are some for whom the sight of the animal produces no distress, because their heart is so strong and their soul so courageous. All that we have related is well known in the lands we have spoken of. Besides, it is possible that all the details we have related from the accounts of the inhabitants of these lands are but chimeras, fantasies and the visions caused by the ills and diseases that can affect any living creature, man or animal. God knows this better than anyone.*”

3. Pictorial representations

Unlike in Western culture, pictorial representations in the Arab tradition exist only in the form of miniatures. They originated in the eighth century and became widespread from the thirteenth century. Although to Western eyes they do not respect linear perspective, on occasions this was practised successfully and denotes a deliberate aesthetic choice⁶³. Arabo-Muslim culture was deeply influenced by the strong antinaturalist neo-platonic current, which tended to produce stylized and idealized forms of representation, resulting in miniatures of an ostensibly artificial character. The components of nature are thus symbols rather than tangible elements.

The miniatures treat a variety of subjects. They depict the life of princes, often associated with gardens, scenes from the everyday lives of peasants and bedouins, scenes set in the desert, often related to mystical representations, and those of battles, fables, miracles, and so forth.

The organization of space in the miniatures is based on the spiral, which structures the different compositional planes. The idea of distance is not given by perspective; rather colour is used to create the illusion of depth. According to the terminology of A. Papadopoulo, the miniature is constituted by the “represented world” (*le monde représenté*) and by the “autonomous world” (*monde autonome*) of forms. The autonomous space gives the impression that the focal point is more or less elevated, since the characters are arranged from the bottom to the top of the painted surface. The autonomous world is associated with the spiral or the arabesque, and is used to structure the painted space. The represented world is constituted by figurative representations, that is to say, by characters and scenic backgrounds. It is in the latter that landscape representations are particularly marked⁶⁴. Miniature paintings, *munamnamat*, are a delicate genre, small in size, and can be considered as scaled down pictures, portraying a variety of representations. The backgrounds of the miniatures, *ka' al-Mandhar*, are often landscapes, architecture, etc. but these representations are not comparable with Western pictorial representations. Muslim miniatures are images that contribute to the illumination of a manuscript. They always remained small in scale and did not take the size of Western pictures until the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

When defining a landscape it is important to include the cultural phenomena, customs and habits specific to the society in which one lives. Decoding landscape thus assumes a common “language”, in this case participation in the great collective or individual emotional reactions and in an entire system of myths, representations and symbols. Analysis of the modes of landscape construction has to allow for the cultural specificities of each country and each civilization, since landscape can possess very different meanings, and many cultural elements closely related to a context can contribute to the decoding of these different meanings. Landscape is merely the cultural expression of the perception of the sensible world and its representation through the culturally-defined criteria that underpin it.

It is important to stress that making a comparison between the modes of landscape construction in the Arab and Western worlds is not an easy exercise. Studies on the forms of

landscape construction in civilizations other than the European, Chinese and Japanese, because of their pictorial traditions, have generated little interest among researchers. The debate⁶⁵ initiated between a number of specialists over the question of landscape in exotic societies, for example, remains unresolved. But some of the arguments advanced by Lévi-Strauss, concerning the impossibility of making comparisons between societies, which have little in common, are very important. In Western culture, it is impossible to conceptualize landscape without making reference to painting; landscape is the mark that man makes on nature and requires a distancing and a scale in order to exist. By adopting these principles, this article has tried to show that the conception of landscape in Arabo-Muslim culture is not the same as in the West, even though the manner of its construction is often identical. It is a civilization that possesses a terminology of landscape, an art of gardens, poetical texts depicting various landscapes, and miniatures which clearly cannot be placed on the same level as Western pictorial representations.

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⁶⁵ *Etudes Rurales*, 1991, January-December, 121-124.

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