



MEI Kaleidoscope | Souks: The Heart of Traditional Urban Life in the Middle East

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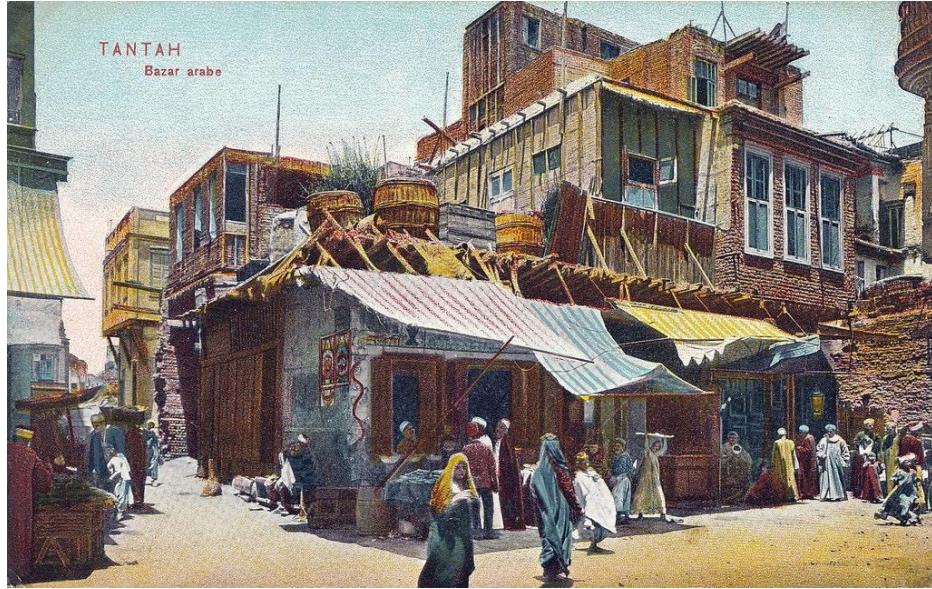
The beating heart of many ancient cities from the Near East to North Africa, the *souk*, an Arabic term translating as the marketplace, is the cradle of traditional urban culture in Arab-Islamic societies. Referred to as the Persian word *bazaar* in some countries¹, the souk, with its unique architecture and communal function, has deep historical and cultural significance. The souk is intrinsically linked to the development of cities, architecture and a sense of place.²

Although familiar to visitors of Middle Eastern cities as tourist attractions that brim with local goods and souvenirs, the origins of the souk trace its way back to the evolution of Islamic societies of the past and the burgeoning of the region as commercial centers of trade. The traditional souk was not just a market but an “economic institution, a communication network and a way of life, a general mode of commercial activity reaching into many aspects of the Arab society.”³ Its open and multifunctional character makes it a welcome to people from all walks of life who exchange news, information and opinions about the affairs of the time.

¹ Awad, Jihad Abdullatif. “Islamic souqs in the urban context: the Souq of Nablus,” Kansas State University, 1989, https://archive.org/stream/islamicsouqsbaza00awad/islamicsouqsbaza00awad_djvu.txt

² Mohammadi Kalan, Arezou & Oliveira, Eduardo. (2016). The Sustainable Architecture of Bazaars and its Relation with Social, Cultural and Economic Components (Case Study: The Historic Bazaar of Tabriz). International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development.

³ Gharipour, Mohammad. “The Bazaar in the Islamic City: Design, Culture and History,” American University in Cairo Press, 2012.

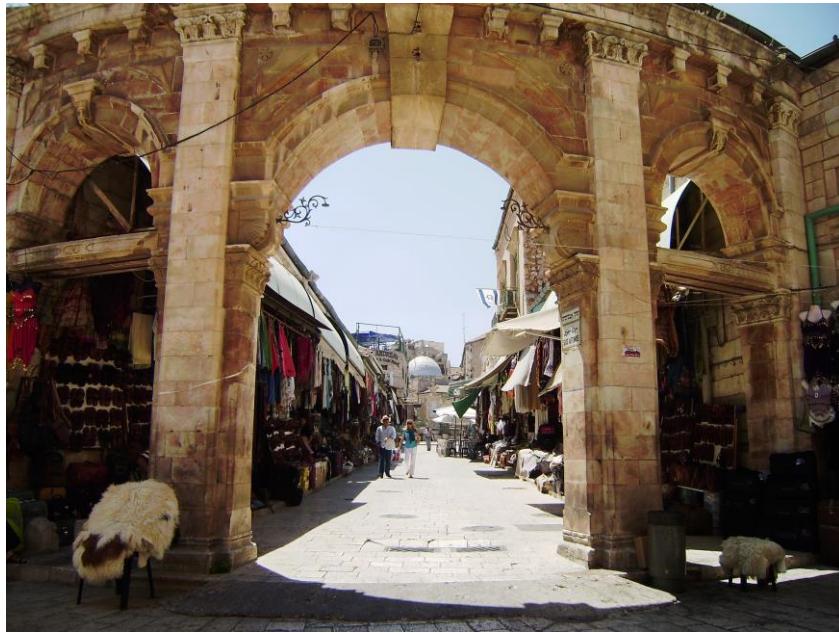


A vintage postcard from the 1930s depicting the souk in Tantah, Egypt. Source: Flickr

There is a lack of archaeological documentation on the development of souks, but the first records tell of its early existence in 3000 BC, suggesting that they originated in Persia.⁴ The history of the souk is interwoven with the history of the Arab people due to their mercantile nature. The Arabs of the time were well-travelled, journeying to Africa, Europe and the Far East to trade their goods and sell their wares. The trade routes that existed between these regions hence bore the exchange and market stations that gave birth to the first souks. These early marketplaces took a variety of forms - “some temporary and mobile, others permanent complexes either attached to existing human settlements or to established caravanserais in remote locations at the crossroads of the main trade routes in the wilderness.”⁵

⁴ Pourjafara, M., Aminib, M., Varzanehc, and Mahdavinejada, M., "Role of bazaars as a unifying factor in traditional cities of Iran: The Isfahan bazaar," *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j foar.2013.11.001>

⁵ Gharipour, Mohammad. "The Bazaar in the Islamic City: Design, Culture and History," American University in Cairo Press, 2012.



Entrance of Souk Aftimos in Old Jerusalem.

Source: Wikipedia

Before the 10th century, souks were mostly identified as *caravanserais*⁶ and were dotted on the outskirts of the city. *Caravanserais* were roadside inns that catered to the throng of merchants, traders, pilgrims and travelers that journeyed across the network of trade routes connecting East to West, from Asia to North Africa and Southeast Europe. With the Islamic conquests and the expansion of the Muslim empire, a more settled, sedentary lifestyle succeeded the nomadic culture of the Arabs. In turn, commerce became a necessity and the souk moved inwards into the city, and solidified its place as the backbone that extended into all areas of traditional, urban life. As these markets grew to thrive, artisans and craftsmen collected themselves in and around the souks to benefit from the active stream of visitors. The business of trading slowly matured among the Arab people, transforming their cities into commercial capitals. Souks grew to hold entire towns, encompassing mosques, schools, public baths, factories, offices and retail facilities.

Souk Okaz in Taif, Saudi Arabia, is a historical market that exemplifies the significance of the souk in the tangible and intangible heritage of the region. It pre-dates the Islamic era, when souks developed a structure and spirit that was strongly influenced by religion. Souk Okaz is described as “one of the most important Arab souks before Islam that had a great contribution to the unification of Arabic language, their habits and promoted Arabic poetry, which has been referred

⁶ Caravanserai definition: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caravanserai>

to recently as Arabic Diwan.”⁷ Its location was said to be barren at the time, without landmarks or built structures.⁸ Tents were only set up during a fixed period every year to host the judges of poetry competitions. Besides supporting the trade industries of fruit, milk, sheep, camels, weapons and silk, Souk Okaz more significantly supported the literary heritage of the Arabs, attracting famous poets from all over to share and spread their literary talent.⁹

With the dawn of Islam, souks began to adopt a structure that made them unique from markets elsewhere. Souks across the Muslim world share similarities in architectural configuration, social networks, proportion parameters and functions in their various traditional urban spaces. While souks, like Souk Okaz, existed in pre-Islamic times, most of the souks that were woven into the urban fabric of cities in the Middle East and North Africa took shape during Islamic rule. For instance, it was during the Umayyad era that the tradition of having covered markets within the Arab-Muslim city began.¹⁰

A prime feature of the souk was a mosque, usually the Friday mosque that could gather large numbers of people. Whether it was a linear pathway extending from the mosque or a large enclosure in which the mosque was central, the souk made it a focal point of all its interactions. It reflected the Islamic character of societies of the past, in which “religious and commercial activities were by no means mutually exclusive”¹¹ and “both the secular and religious institutions supported each other.”¹² Business transactions and social conduits in the souk also followed a religious code of ethics, reflecting how economy and religion intersected in its development.

⁷ Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage: “SCTH concludes important scientific study on the history and antiquities of Souk Okaz,” 21/06/2017

⁸ Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage: “SCTH concludes important scientific study on the history and antiquities of Souk Okaz,” 21/06/2017

⁹ Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage: “SCTH concludes important scientific study on the history and antiquities of Souk Okaz,” 21/06/2017

¹⁰ Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage: “SCTH concludes important scientific study on the history and antiquities of Souk Okaz,” 21/06/2017

¹¹ Awad, Jihad Abdullatif. “Islamic souqs in the urban context: the Souq of Nablus,” Kansas State University, 1989, https://archive.org/stream/islamicsouqsbaza00awad/islamicsouqsbaza00awad_djvu.txt

¹² Awad, Jihad Abdullatif. “Islamic souqs in the urban context: the Souq of Nablus,” Kansas State University, 1989, https://archive.org/stream/islamicsouqsbaza00awad/islamicsouqsbaza00awad_djvu.txt



Souq al-Hiraj in the souk of Aleppo, Syria, 2005.

Source: https://sq.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skeda:05-03-23_InsideTheSoukInAleppo.JPG



A carpet market in Grand Bazaar in the 1880s

Source: Pinterest

The religious character of the souk can also be observed in the way it is organized. Guilds, which

grouped craftsmen according to their trade, regulated the economy of the souk. Producers of the same type of goods were also concentrated in specific parts of the market according to a hierarchy influenced by Islam. Hence, one would observe that goods and services that were important in Islam or deemed valuable to a Muslim - such as holy books, rosaries and perfumes - were positioned closer to the mosque while those that were less of a priority or undesirable stood at the edges of the souk.¹³

Today, while souks continue to be symbols of tradition, they have lost their centrality and vitality in urban life. The souk's prominence has been overshadowed by commercial centers that have developed outside of the traditional city. New central business districts now serve the needs of urban societies with modern retailing facilities and institutions. Traditional features such as guilds have also lost their influence in this shift towards the modern and secular, compromising religious values that once characterized life in an Arab-Muslim city.



The Grand Bazaar in Isfahan dates back to the 17th century.
Source: http://arasbaran.org/en/print_news.cfm?id=75

Yet, the world's oldest and largest souks continue to attract throngs of people daily, such as the Grand Bazaar of Isfahan in Iran and the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul. The Iranian bazaar continues to form the commercial center of Isfahan, and finds its significance "further enhanced by the fact that it is surrounded by a number of public shopping thoroughfares which, although formally not part of the original bazaar complex, nevertheless are now an integral and dynamic part it."¹⁴

¹³ Awad, Jihad Abdullatif. "Islamic souqs in the urban context: the Souq of Nablus," Kansas State University, 1989, https://archive.org/stream/islamicsouqsbaza00awad/islamicsouqsbaza00awad_djvu.txt

¹⁴ Iran on Trip: *Bazaar of Isfahan*, <http://wwwiranontripir/page/en-509/Bazaar-of-Isfahan>

Be it a tourist drawn to the souk's authenticity or the researcher keen to uncover more about its role in urban and Islamic history, visitors to the souk will find themselves exposed to the deep-rooted culture of its societies and the civilizations these bustling spaces have supported and served.