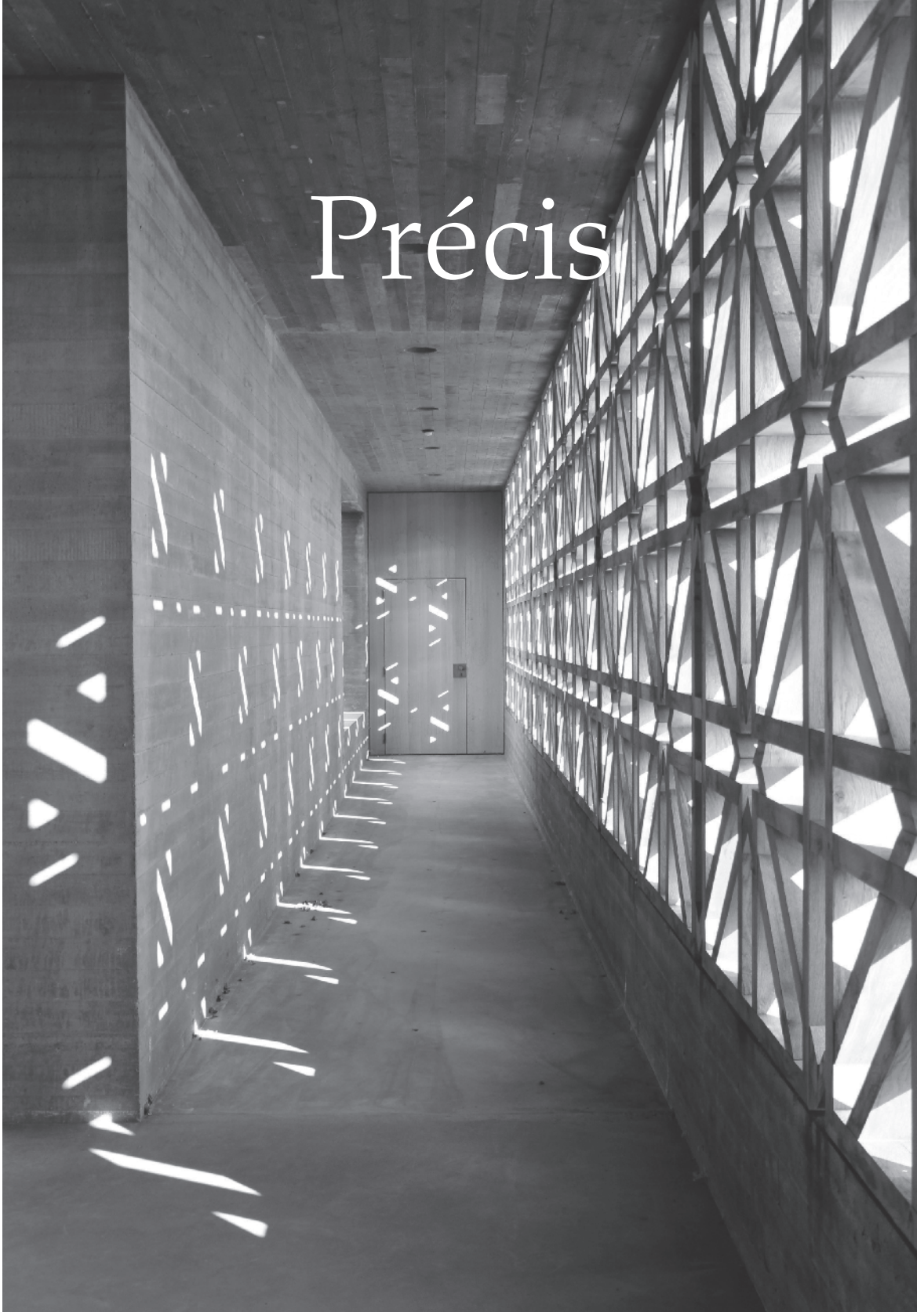


Précis



CONFERENCE PRÉCIS

IJIA's précis serve as records of important exhibitionary events, seminars, conferences, conference panels, roundtables, workshops, or announcements that treat or are relevant to Islamic architecture, design, planning and urbanism and are usually written by a participant in the event.

'MEDIEVAL TOMBS AND THEIR SPATIAL CONTEXT: STRATEGIES OF COMMEMORATION IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM', UNIVERSITY OF TÜBINGEN, KUNSTHISTORISCHES INSTITUT, GERMANY, FEBRUARY 18–20, 2016

Reviewed by Sara Mondini, Ca' Foscari University

[Death] rituals do not appear as inert expressions of a religion and a society, but as dynamic forms designed to bring about a social and religious transformation.¹

This three-day conference, held at the Kunsthistorisches Institut of Tübingen, was organized by Professors Markus Thome and Francine Giese and by Kristina Seizinger, MA. A rich and dense programme, the efficiency, attention to detail and helpfulness of the organizers, and the marvellous setting of Tübingen, constituted the key ingredients for the event's success. Consisting of a workshop and three sessions, the conference was kicked off with the workshop of the Graduate College, 'Religious Knowledge in Pre-modern Europe', *Tomb Topographies: the Construction and Perception of Sacred Places and Social Distinction* (chaired by Jörn Staecker). The first session, *Location of the Sepulchral Monument: Appropriation and Construction of Commemoration Places* (chaired by Lorenz Korn), took place on the morning of the 19th, while the second session, *Shaping Concepts: Construction of Meaning through Formal, Spatial and Ritual Reference Frames* (chaired by Anna Pawlak and Lars Zieke), was held on Friday afternoon and the first part of Saturday morning. The last session, *Political Strategies: Power Issues and Sepulchral Monuments as Means of Formation of Identity* (chaired by Daniela Wagner and Patricia Blessing), brought the conference to a close on February 20.

Particularly notable among the nearly 25 papers presented were the contributions by the two keynote speakers, Tanja Michalsky and Doris Behrens-Abouseif. With reference to two different contexts – the former a Christian context (the topography of sepulchral monuments in early modern Naples), the latter an Islamic one (the Christian influences on the Sultan Qalawun mausoleum in Cairo) – these papers offered an excellent template for research on 'medieval tombs and their spatial context': wide-ranging, detailed, precise, exhaustive and firmly focused on the variety of sources available.

The papers more directly related to the Islamic context covered various major regions in addition to Cairo, the city explored by Doris Behrens-Abouseif. They ranged from the wider Persianate world (Richard McClary) to Konya and Istanbul (Patricia Blessing and Fozia Parveen); from the transcultural exchanges in medieval Spain (Francine Giese) to Cairo and Jerusalem (Sami L. De Giosa) and the Indian sultanates (Sara Mondini), covering the period from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries.

The studies presented were characterized by a continuous 'tension' between the specific analysis of the funerary structures, their decorative schemes, the possible 'influences' that determined their appearance and shape, and their location within given geographical areas and architectural landscapes. The questions raised concerning the geomorphology of the structures' location, or their relation to other urban or extra-urban buildings, brought out their role as a driving force for urban development, opening up new perspectives of investigation.

The fruitful debates that accompanied each session demonstrated how the two worlds – the Christian world and the Muslim world – which are all too often perceived as separate and remote in terms of their traditions and customs – share dynamics of patronage, construction and localization. As a consequence, the appropriate methods of investigation across the two fields were found to be closer and more similar than expected, suggesting that a more interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach is required, involving, among others, archaeologists, architects, art historians, urbanists and historians.

Both in the Christian and in the Islamic world, funerary structures, their conformation, the choice of decorative elements made by their patrons, the epigraphic programmes, their position in an urban area or *extra-muros*, and the possible presence of grave goods proved to be just as essential as other typologies of buildings, if not more so, for tracing not only the profile of patrons, but also the general character of the coeval societies and the sociopolitical and religious context in which they arose.

Having ascertained that medieval tombs perfectly fulfil their function as a means of commemorating, elevating and consecrating the deceased, the Tübingen debates demonstrated how essential it is for scholars today to look at 'their location and spatial situation', by interpreting 'space beyond physical boundaries and frames as a relational definition based on social construct in the sense of collective perception, use and appropriation'. This broader approach, a gaze able to move from specificity, from artistic detail, to the overall plan of a structure and its relation with the urban context and surrounding landscape, as well as with end users – both historical and present – must necessarily be extended chronologically. This would enable scholars to detect any changes in the perception and frequentation of the 'funerary space' and in the rituals connected to it, in order to reconstruct the original intentions and peculiarities.²

The conference confirmed that the comprehension and representation of funerary spaces plays a significant cultural role for a deeper understanding of Christian and Islamic societies and their transformations across the centuries. Funerary monuments and tombs reflect philosophical conceptions, but at the same time make explicit the political, economic and social claims of their patrons: they serve not just as eternal abodes but as markers of social and religious identity, as promoters of social and religious changes. To better appreciate the importance of the spaces that are the focus of our debate and

their historical and political centrality, it is enough to consider the history of Medina's Baqī' al-Gharqad or the recent fate of the many mausoleums, burials and shrines contested by groups espousing different faiths.

On the other hand, the conference may have suffered from the limited presence of Islamic art historians and from its presentation and discussion in German, which may have made it hard for non-German speakers to follow the debate and exchange views. Despite these minor drawbacks, it is clear that the organizers have hosted an extremely fruitful conference on medieval tombs, one that deserves to become a regular event: a recurrent occasion for scholars working in different fields to exchange ideas and grow. It is thus desirable that in the near future Markus and Francine – who are to be applauded for the success of this first conference – will pass the torch to other colleagues, so as to ensure that we may proceed in the direction of a growing collaboration between experts focusing on the Christian and Muslim worlds and open up to the multitude of aspects of funerary spaces that are still in need of further, in-depth investigation.

Contributor Details

Sara Mondini is temporary research fellow at the Venice Ca' Foscari University. She holds a Ph.D. in Oriental Studies from Venice Ca' Foscari University (2009) and from 2009 to 2014 has been Adjunct Professor of Art History of India and Central Asian, and South Asian Visual Culture at the Ca' Foscari. She served as Adjunct Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at the University of Granada from 2010 to 2013. Mondini has conducted extensive research on Muslim, Indian and Indo-Islamic art and architecture in India, the Middle East and North Africa. Her investigations concern the patronage of funerary architecture in the Indian Sultanates, from both a stylistic and sociopolitical point of view, by focusing on the way in which shared and/or contested sacred spaces are understood.

Endnotes

1. Leor Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 236.
2. Until now, similar investigations have been generally carried out in the Islamic context only for major structures. An emblematic example in this sense is the excellent work accomplished by Ebba Koch on the Taj Mahal and the Agra riverfront gardens. See his *The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).