Mahala: Magical Islands A Nissological Perspective on the Historical Landscape of Sarajevo

Mahala: Magična Ostrva Nisološka perspektiva historijskog pejzaža grada Sarajeva

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Abstract This paper investigates the mahale (singular mahala), the Ottoman residential neighbourhoods of historical Sarajevo. These consist of clusters of courtyard houses grouped around mosques and were formerly organised as self-administered and self-sufficient neighbourhoods. Today they form a historical landscape that is mostly detached from the contemporary architectural and urban discourse. The investigation looks into the history and origins of the mahala archetype, as well as its contemporary re-emergence, arguing for a critical assessment and re-invention. This is undertaken by linking the mahala's original concept to the idea of the urban island, using the methods and metaphors of nissology, the geographical study of islands. By following a critical historiography of key examples of the type, the mahala, as an island, is understood as an ambivalent device, one that incorporates both a military apparatus for imperial colonisation and a decolonial social apparatus for the empowerment of local settlements. The paper concludes by proposing a re-invention of this apparatus, understanding it as a bottom-up decolonial idea: a "magical" island formed by social (and mythical) practices that reiterate local communal "interiors".

Keywords mahala; island; Sarajevo; nissology; landscape.

Sažetak Rad istražuje mahale (jed. mahala), osmanske stambene četvrti historijskog Sarajeva. One prikazuju skupine dvorišnih kuća grupiranih oko džamija i formalno su bile organizirane kao samostalna i samodovoljna naselja. Kao ostaci prošlosti, danas one čine historijski pejzaž koji je uglavnom odvojen od savremenog arhitektonskog i urbanističkog diskursa. Istraživanje se bavi historijom i arhetipskim porijeklom ovog tipa, kao i njegovim savremenim ponovnim pojavljivanjem, zalažući se za kritičku procjenu i ponovno osmišljavanje. Ovo se postiže povezivanjem originalnog koncepta mahale s idejom urbanog ostrva, koristeći metode i metafore nisologije, područja proučavanja doslovnih geografskih ostrva. Prateći kritičku historiografiju kroz ključne primjere ovog tipa, ostrvo mahala se shvata kao ambivalentni uređaj. Onaj koji uključuje i vojni aparat za carsku kolonizaciju i društveni dekolonijalni aparat za osnaživanje lokalnih naseljeničkih grupa. Rad završava predlogom ponovnog izmišljanja ovog aparata, shvatajući ga kao dekolonijalna ideja. "Magično" ostrvo formirano društvenim (i mitskim) praksama koje ponavljaju lokalne zajedničke "unutrašnjosti".

Ključne riječi mahala; ostrvo; Sarajevo; nisologija; pejzaž.

1 Introduction

[...] Here in this island we arriv'd; and here
Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit
Than other princess' can, [...]

The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2 (Shakespeare & Stratmann, 2025, p. 28)

In Shakespeare's The Tempest, Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, betrayed by his brother, strands on a mysterious remote island. It is an island of magical creatures: the only native inhabitant is Caliban, the son of a witch, displayed as a deformed, monstrous being. With the help of books of magic Prospero takes control of the island by freeing the spirit Ariel from a tree and enslaving Caliban. He uses his powers to shipwreck his enemies from Milan and to orchestrate multiple events that lead them to regret their plots against him, one of which is Caliban's conspiracy to kill Prospero, foiled by Prospero's magic tricks. reflecting on the structure and aims of the course, as well as some of the early student outcomes.

Figure 1 The Enchanted Island Before the Cell of Prospero, engraving by Peter Simon after Henry Fuseli, 1797. Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The Tempest was written during England's first overseas expansion campaigns, and was initially critically considered in the context of "preternatural beings", in which Caliban was characterised as a rebellious anti-democratic and "comic wild man" (Griffiths, 1983, p. 159). From the nineteenth century to the present, though in an ambivalent manner that evidences its complexity, critics have considered the play in relation to contemporary colonial studies[1] (Griffiths, 1983, p. 159). It is the coloniser Prospero who takes over the remote territory, for the purpose of resolving his conflicts, and it is the colonised, enslaved islander, Caliban, who is perceived as a "threatening 'other'" (Willis, 1989, p. 279) (Figure 1). Meredith Anne Skura summarises this dichotomy, reflecting on it geopolitically as "Europe's confrontation with the Other" (Skura, 1989, p. 43).

Of interest for this paper is this topic of "otherness" – its political connotation and its spatial translation to the metaphor of the island. The island is the geographical representation of the state of otherness. It reflects the conditions of separation, isolation and exception. (Hajdarević, 2026a, p. 21) Deriving from old English *igland*, 'island' is a combination of *ig*, translated to "island", and "land", literally forming "island-land". Thus it is a qualifying term describing a special situation within the general condition of land. Or, in other words, a land that is defined by its insularity (Onions et al., 1992, pp. 486–487), (Merriam-Webster, 2025, April 19), (Hajdarević, 2026a, p. 37). Thus "islands – as spatial topographies – are (other) lands within lands, (other) places within places, or (other) realities within realities." (Hajdarević, 2026a, p. 38)

This territorial definition is taken from nissology, the field of geography relating to the study of islands, that in this paper is used to reflect on the concept of the urban island within critical urban theory. The idea of cities as composed of insular entities emerges in today's architectural discourse as an alternative to large-scale modernist masterplans. Critical researchers such as Pier Vittorio Aureli and Maria Shéhérazade Giudici (Aureli & Giudici, 2019), Édouard Glissant (Glissant, 2009), (Glissant & Obrist, 2021) and Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze et al., 2004) view islands as sites of political resistance against capitalist urban expansion.

However, as in *The Tempest*, where the metaphor of the island represents an ambiguous state between places of magic and marginalisation, this paper explores the concepts of insularity and urban separation, referencing Douglas Spencer's work which questions the value of the island as an enclosure (Spencer, 2016) as well as Giorgio Agamben (Agamben, 2021) and Philipp Oswalt's argument that islands often reflect either marginalised groups living in legal limbo or capitalist gated communities (Oswalt et al., 2013).

Within this framework, the paper discusses the concept of the island and its spatial reflection as a way of creating and administering human settlement, with particular reference to the phenomenon of the Sarajevan mahala.[2]

The mahala (plural mahale) is the South-East European term for the type of residential neighbourhoods created in the administration of Ottoman cities in the Balkans. It consisted of courtyard houses grouped around a mosque (Figure 2) and had its own neighbourhood infrastructures, as well as facilities such as wells, shops, bakeries and schools. Traditionally it was based on Islamic behavioural norms and rituals, as well as mutual care between its inhabitants, and represented a self-administered and self-sufficient neighbourhood.

The spaces of mahale, though partially transformed, still maintain their original morphological composition. But, stripped from their cultural connotation, they have lost their significance in determining the condition of the city and its inhabitants' way of life. Although large parts of these spaces are legally protected (by regulatory plans, see Regulacioni plan 'Mahale-Kovači', (2014)) – some even falling within the protective zone of the historical urban landscape (HUL) as part of the Ottoman centre of Sarajevo, their status remains fairly undetermined. They represent a remnant of the past, one that has not been significantly incorporated into contemporary urban discourse and development.

This paper, therefore, argues for a contemporary critical assessment of the mahala as an urban island; it asks: What potential does it offer for contemporary urban life in Sarajevo? I will argue that it is the way the mahala form creates self-sufficient insularity – spatially as well as socially – that is its crucial mechanism.

In the particular context of Sarajevo, by abstracting the mahala to the concept of an island, it can be positioned within the idea of the city as a historical urban "landscape". The paper thus focuses on islands as a specific type of landscape in order to re-evaluate their significance.

Here, the etymology of the term "land" is also significant. It derives from the Old English lond and the Germanic *landa, meaning "untilled land", as well as the Old Frisian land, lond meaning "land, earth, country, landed property" (Merriam-Webster, 2026, March 9). Hence, it relates a particular territory to

1 For the discourse on this see also, for instance, Willis (1989), Skura (1989), Fuchs (1997), Pierce (1999), and Brotton (1998).

2 This study builds on my previous work in Hajdarević (2026a) and Hajdarević (2026b), but extends the analysis of the mahala to further case studies and explorations of the phenomenon as a (magical) social practice.

Figure 2 Plans, examples of the traditional mahala type.
Source: Author, 2025.

contexts of cultivation and property, linking it with control, governance and agricultural appropriation. It can thus be seen, and is shaped linguistically, within the European colonial discourse since the colonisation of the Americas. In documents such as, among many others, the Spanish conquest's 1513 Requierimento (de Oviedo y Valdés, 1959, pp. 227–232), Pope Alexander VI's 1493 Inter Caetera (Giménez Fernández, 1944, p. 341 ff.), and John Locke's Second Treatise of Government in 1690 (Locke, 1690), the term is connected to indigenous territory that is transformed into "land" as a legitimate subject of European sovereignty, thus becoming legal property through cultivation as "improvement". Keeping this connotation in mind (as the island is similarly associated with imperial colonisation) the term is treated here in connection with the words "landscape" and "island", in order to emphasize their relation.

The paper offers, first, a critical historiography tracing key examples of the type, presenting and investigating the idea of the island through two aspects of the history of the mahala, metaphorically linking them to the figures of Prospero and Caliban. In the first part, "Martial Islands", it is presented as an imperial apparatus for the occupation of newly claimed territory. This is investigated in the context of the foundation of Sarajevo during the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century CE, and in relation to the origins of the mahala in the Arabian Empire during the rise of Islam from the sixth to the eighth century CE. The second part, "Magical Islands", in contrast, investigates the notion of the mahala as an island as a bottom-up social practice for the claiming of land for collective settlement and its organisation. This is investigated first in pre-Islamic prototypes of the mahala in Arabian nomad tent camps and their shift towards sedentary settlement. Then, on the opposite side of the historical spectrum, the mahala is considered within its emergence in contemporary Roma settlements through an example in contemporary Sarajevo.

But, just as the relation between Prospero and Caliban is revealed to be ambivalent and complex, lying between good and bad, order and chaos, right and wrong, where the individuals never categorically play the role of one extreme, the idea of the island emerges in a similar manner. The idea of the mahala appears as a multi-faceted apparatus operating between occupation and rebellion, with colonial and decolonial, imperial and communal aspects, as well as subjugating and empowering tendencies. Consequently, the idea of urban islands thus consists of both potential and danger: potential in the sense of being an instrument for the participation and inclusion of local inhabitants in the urban discourse and the claim for territorial property, and danger in terms of creating precarious enclaves or gated communities based on homogeneous ethnic identities and enclosed and separated from the surrounding social and spatial fabric of the city.

The paper, in being aware of both potential and danger, then concludes by focusing on the island's most important aspect, that of relationality: relationality between the inhabitants of the island; relationality towards its surroundings, but, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the relationality between inhabitants and the land they settle on. A relation that has to be practised, negotiated, recognized and protected, in administrative and political ways, but also in the community's social rituals. It is the enabling of the reiteration of these practices, their protection and their connection, to gain territorial property that, I argue, is the crucial potential of the mahala as island.

Therefore, historical Sarajevo, with its mahale, emerges as a literal landscape, a composition of potential local communal and contradictory lands as islands, that in their relation together form a multitude of future possibilities.

As Prospero and Caliban's ambivalent relationship is demonstrated, negotiated and scrutinised through the magical powers of the island, the potential and danger of the mahala island are used as a lens for discussing and reviewing the conditions of collective living in (historical) Sarajevo, thus, furthermore, introducing a discussion of human settlement types in general by investigating the aspect of "otherness" within a city community.

2 Martial Islands

"Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have us'd thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care; and lodg'd thee
In my own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child."

Prospero to Caliban
The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2 (Shakespeare & Stratmann, 2025, p. 42)

2.1 Isles of the Ottomans

Towards the end of the fifteenth century Europe was shaped by major transitional shifts that marked the end of the Middle Ages. One of the defining events was the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Constantinople in 1453 (Crowley, 2013). This was conducted under the rule of Sultan Mehmed II – thenceforth commonly known as 'The Conqueror' – and definitively represented the Ottomans' push towards the Balkans. In removing all the local dynasties, Mehmed II intended to establish sovereignty on the peninsula all the way up to the Danube river, representing

the empire's new natural border (İnalcık, 2001/2018, pp. 38–41). Around the time that Constantinople fell, Ottoman legions arrived at the narrow valley of the river Miljacka in what is now central Bosnia, the location of the future city of Sarajevo (Biščević, 2006, p. 17). The landscape was populated by scattered Slavic villages positioned on the surrounding hills (Bejtić, 1973, pp. 28–29), small fortified towns such as Kotorac, Vrhbosna, and Hodidjed, and a weekly market place near the northern riverbank (Sumarni Popis Sandžaka Bosna Iz 1468/69. Godine, n.d., pp. 69–71).

In order to establish a functioning border territory – and thus a supply of resources and a financing system for further expansion campaigns (Malcolm, 2011, pp. 111–112) – the Ottomans implemented a feudal administrative apparatus: as well as the establishment of a military camp at the southern riverbank, newly occupied land in the valley around it was allotted to military leaders (Hajdarević, 2026a, pp. 64–66). These leaders – the most notable of them being Isa Beg Ishaković – assigned farmers to cultivate the land and in return charged them by withholding part of their harvest (Malcolm, 2011, p. 116). This system, known as *timar*, enabled these leaders not only to rapidly establish wealth (Zlatar, 1996, p. 12), but also to introduce imperial economic rule upon the local population.

The empire's intention, though, was not solely to exploit the land and its people, but rather to establish a functioning system of constant economic flow. Thus the military officials, in order to confirm their leadership – locally, as well as towards the Sultan – invested their income in charitable endowments, or *waqf* (*vakuf* in Bosnian). These consisted of monetary funds, as well as finance for the establishment of public institutions such as schools, public kitchens, bridges, fountains, inns, caravanserais, hammams and bazaars, and mainly, and most importantly, mosques. Revenues from these institutions were ploughed back into the investment funds, creating a mostly circular self-sufficient economic system (Zlatar, 1996, p. 12). This apparatus of harvest revenues and charitable circular endowments led to the rapid urban development and Islamisation of the valley, accomplishing, in parallel, imperial occupational rule and local financial stability.

The apparatus was directly connected to territorial rights and the relation of the population to the land it settled on. As newly occupied territory was usually owned by the Sultan (S. H. Gibb & Bowen, 1957, p. 166), the endowments meant that it was linked to metaphysical rights. They were given in honour of God, remained in undisputed public ownership and were intended to be used solely for the public good (Mehmedović, 2017, p. 17). So, in combining imperial with metaphysical ownership, the Sultan's intentions were not only militarily comprehensible but also justified on a religious basis.

These endowments encouraged new inhabitants to settle, as the monetary funds were also used to distribute loans to the local population (Zlatar, 1996, p. 13). In this combination of independent property and local urban development funding, the areas of settlement developed into economically and administratively independent clusters of local self-government (Zlatar, 1996, p. 97). With the endowment and the establishment of settlements as independent neighbourhoods, these areas were officially recognised as mahale (Hajdarević, 2026a, p. 71).

Figure 3 Plan, Ottoman Sarajevo as an abstracted cluster of mahale, Source: Author, 2025.

In a nissological sense, then, the apparatus thus created a cluster of islands of local settlement that, through their connection to the imperial institution of the military camp in the centre, emerged as an "archipelagic landscape"(Hajdarević, 2026a, p. 77) (Figure 3). A city with the ambiguous duality of decentralised occupatory rule and local self-sufficient settlements – in other words, a city landscape of mahala islands.

2.2 The Arabian Imperial Archetype

The Ottomans did not invent the idea of the mahala as an imperial device. As the etymology of the word suggests, the emergence of this settlement type can be traced back to the advent of Islam and its subsequent development in the Arabian Empire from the seventh century CE onwards. The Arabian etymological origin of the term is "a place where one makes a halt, where one settles" (Bosworth, 1986, p. 1220), linking it to early nomad tent camp structures, that only with the arrival of Islam became a city type. I will discuss the earliest connotations in the next section, concentrating here on the later Islamic type.

Somewhat similar to Ottoman urban development at the end of the Middle Ages, the Arabian Islamic city's major consolidation took place within the empire's campaign of expansion. In this case, though, it was on the threshold between the ancient world order and the Middle Ages. After the prophet Muhammad initiated the first Islamic community in Medina in 622 CE – introducing the mosque as the central settlement type (Hajdarević, 2026a, pp. 131–132) – the succeeding caliphs began expanding the empire from central Arabia towards Persia and North Africa. On newly occupied territory the military founded settlements as garrison towns, or *misr* (Whitcomb, n.d.). Reminiscent of earlier Roman camps, the central structures consisted of an enclosed regular grid system organised around a mosque and an adjacent palace (see the example of Kufa (Khosravi, 2014, pp. 32–33) and Anjar (Hillenbrand, n.d., pp. 60–

61)). The structures served as accommodation for the military organisation and provided assets for military staff and ongoing campaigns through the taxation of the newly conquered people (Lapidus, 2014, p. 52). As Hillenbrand summarises, they represented outposts of Medina and acted as "launching pads of invasions" (Hillenbrand, n.d., p. 80).

These camps were the initial structures positioned in the territory. The further development of the settlement was then conducted through the encampment of tribes affiliated to the military (the army even "divided into units based on tribal lines": see Hitti, 1996, p. 27)) living in its vicinity. As seen in the example of Fustat – a garrison town from the seventh century CE founded in the area of today's Cairo (Kubiak, 1987, p. 1) – these tribal camps were positioned around the central military quarter (Kubiak, 1987, p. 68). The land was allotted to individual groups by a process of affiliations to the military leadership and complex negotiations determined by the degree of power and influence each tribe held (Kubiak, 1987, p. 69). With the act of settling at a certain area of newly occupied territory, the tribes were granted property rights to the land, enabling them to establish a self-administered settlement. Within these, "all the decisions [...] were made by the inhabitants" and "[s]hared spaces [...] were collectively owned and controlled." (Akbar, 1989, p. 29) Thus, like the endowment structures in Sarajevo, the relation of the settlers to their land remained in a duality of imperial rule and local control. As Lapidus clarifies, the territory could not be seized by other tribes and it remained in permanent ownership of the community (Kubiak, 1987, p. 69).

Reflecting back to the Ottoman apparatus, the Arabian Empire's archetypes reveal further nuances of the concept of the mahala. The landscape of islands, in order to be stable and functional, was based on territorial negotiation between a central institutionalised authority and the self-administration of individual settlement groups (Figure 4). In a nissological context, the principle establishes an important basis for understanding independent settlements within the greater structure of a city: the relational structure of their interaction, in which territorial rights and the distribution of properties is constantly negotiated, is of crucial importance. Furthermore, as Akbar describes, it also involved the direct physical demarcation of boundaries that each quarter's establishment was linked to: "If each tribe had the right to establish its own boundaries, it certainly owned and controlled the land within them." (Akbar, 1989, pp. 28–29) Interestingly, this is also reflected in the North African synonym for mahala, khatta. Literally translated as "line", it denotes the act of "demarcat[ing] a place, or outlin[ing] it with a wall [...]." (Akbar, 1989, p. 23) Within nissology, researchers highlight this feature of the idea of the island as having crucial potential: by thinking in archipelagic ways, collective identity is enhanced through the relation between individual groups and their bounding of space (see, for instance Polack (1998, p. 229) or Hay (2006, p.30)).

Nevertheless, in both imperial examples – the Ottoman and Arabian – the island, along with the mahala, is self-evidently an occupational device. It was primarily introduced in the former to control the local people in bordering regions and in the latter as a rigid system that allowed the diverse tribal military staff to be easily controlled and mobilised. Furthermore, as Kubiak concludes, this reduced the chances of a hegemonic individual tribe (Kubiak, 1987, p. 70), creating a functioning apparatus for expansion under central rule.

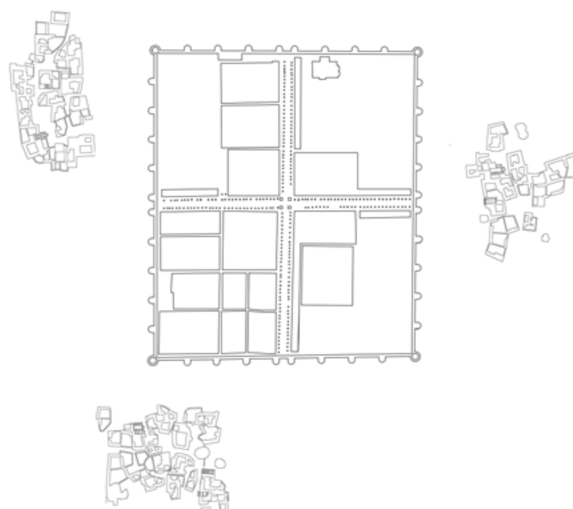

Figure 4 Plan, an Arabian military camp with adjacent settlements, imagined collage, Source: Author, 2025.

This definition of the mahala through an imperial lens evidences the concept of the island as a colonial device. In the next chapter, the notion of the mahala as an island is observed from the diametrically contrasting point of view of decolonisation and empowerment. As the metaphor of the island in its complexity displays a multi-layered ambiguous state, one containing both separation and connectivity, control and resistance, the next section will concentrate on investigating it from a contrasting perspective within history and the contemporary status quo.

3 Magical Islands

"This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me;
wouldst give me
Water with berries in't; and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd thee,
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own King: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island."

Caliban to Prospero
The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2 (Shakespeare & Stratmann, 2025, p. 42)

3.1 Tribal Islands

Although the mahala is a profoundly Islamic type, its origins can be traced even further back, to pre-Islamic Arabian settlements. The etymology of the Arabian noun *mahalla* as "a place where one makes a halt" originates from the verb *halla*, that translates as "to untie a knot or luggage" (Bosworth, 1986, p. 1220). This establishes a direct link to the prototypes of the mahala found in Arabian tent camps and also relates it to the characteristic of impermanence. This connotation thus reflects a phenomenon that marked an important phase in the early development of the mahala and consequently the Arabian city: the transition of temporary settlements to permanent ones. From an architectural perspective this emerges with the *parembole nomadon*, or nomad camp villages (Kennedy, 2014, p. 25), (Helms, 1990, p. 39). These appear from around the sixth millennium BCE onwards in the steppe of the Arabian Peninsula. This was a landscape which lacked a continuous supply of resources, but which was also a threshold between the kingdoms and urban societies of Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt and the Mediterranean (Hoyland, 2001, p. 1).

Within these conditions, Arabian nomad society developed a settlement system that was marked by a dichotomy between the temporary and the permanent, and was in addition based on the demarcation from the exterior world of adjacent threatening empires (Donner, 2017, pp. 26–29). Hence, the later imperial apparatus of the mahala originated here as an apparatus for constructing metaphysical and literal interiors for communal survival and resistance. Based on a code of loyalty towards their individual nomad clan, the settlers set up circular camps consisting of groups of tents within hierarchical layers of enclosure. The tent represented the individual core family and household and was grouped together with other tents into a *hayy*, that constituted a clan (Hitti, 1996, p. 26). These clans, along with other affiliated and friendly clans, formed a cluster, which made up a tribe (Hitti, 1970, p. 14). Spatially nomad settlements were composed of succeeding layers of borders implemented as planted rings of dry bushes and trenches. Separated from the outside world, the inner spheres interconnected, creating a collective area in the centre that enabled communal gathering spaces (Bianca, 1975, pp. 101–102) (Figure 5).

In the steppe it was crucial to continually reinforce the membership of this cellular hierarchy in order to enjoy security from hostile outsiders and be guaranteed access to food and water supplies. This was established by a close-knit relationship to the affiliated communities through what the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldun referred to as "group feeling" (Khaldun, 2015, pp. 97–98), through an unconditional bond of loyalty, or *asabiyya*, towards the members of a clan and its sheikh, which were considered to descend from one blood line[3] (Hitti, 1996, pp. 26–27). The sheikh, as the head of the clan, was established through consensus by the clan members, based on his generosity and courage. Nevertheless, his decision-making authority for common military or judicial affairs was limited, as he was obliged to consult with a tribal council composed of the heads of the individual families (Hitti, 1996, p. 28). As Philip K. Hitti summarises, it was this social relational structure that enabled the clans and tribes to become "self-sufficient and absolute" (Hitti, 1996, p. 27) units that were also ideologically separate from their exteriors. This is underlined by the fact that external relations with other tribes were marked by blood feuds (Hitti, 1996, p. 26) and raids (Hitti, 1996, p. 25).

This absolute "interiority" led to the development of insular fortresses, establishing the independence of the tribes from the exterior imposition of laws (Khaldun, 2015, pp. 95–97). As Stefano Bianca points out, this is also reflected in the Arab terms for dwelling, the etymological connotations of which relate the residential area to a protected and sacred interior space, encircled by boundaries which protected it from outside intrusion (Bianca, 2000, p. 72). These intrusions were not only by physical beings: they also included disturbances by metaphysical spirits – *jinn* – that dwelled in the dark and deserted exteriors[4] (Henninger, 2017, p. 115). Interestingly, these spirits were considered to be living in tribal affiliations that reflected the relationships between the living (Henninger, 1981, pp. 143–144). They were believed to reside in the ground and were disturbed and enraged by the cultivation of the soil, the digging of wells and the constructing of buildings (Henninger, 1981, p. 146). Measures of resistance to their influence consisted of animal sacrifices and the sprinkling of their blood (Henninger, 1981, p. 150).

So the interior territory – representing the cells of the community, from the most intimate "body" of the family to the tribe – was defended using rituals and magical practice[5] (Bianca, 2000, p. 73). In particular, these practices – combined with the reiteration of clan loyalty – demonstrated a strong cult of respecting tribal ancestors. Reflected in the original meaning of asabiyya, as "spirit of kinship" (H. A. R. Gibb et al., 1986, p. 681), the ancestors were regarded as legendary heroes or mythical forbears and – as Joseph Henninger suggests – even developed into deities.[6] Despite their status they were regarded as in need of charity from the living, through animal sacrifices and the erection of stone structures (Henninger, 2017, pp. 116–117). As with the endowment structures of the Ottomans discussed earlier, sacrificed animals were regarded as in the property of the god(s) and provided communal meals (Henninger, 2017, p. 119). This leads to another similarity, as the settlements again displayed an ambiguous relation to their land. The parts that had earlier been portable – the tent and its contents, as well as the livestock – belonged to the individuals, whereas the pasture land, the local natural resources and the land that was settled on remained the common property of

3 Nevertheless, it was possible for unrelated "clients" to establish a similar relation through an oath (Caskel, 2017, p. 34).

4 Note that Henninger discusses here the origin of these beliefs and doubts whether the Bedouin nomads actually viewed the desert as a metaphysical threat.

5 These practices consisted of spells, counterspells and charms (Wellhausen, 1897, pp. 159–167).

6 He also suggests that myths were attributed retrospectively to some ancestors, granting them divine status (Henninger, 1981, pp. 40–41).

the tribe (Hitti, 1970, p. 14), (Khazanov, 1994, p. 123). With the cultivation of land and the act of settlement – both seen as disturbing the common ownership – the individual sacrificed a part of his private property – the livestock – in order to gain security.

As described, the tribal settlements of pre-Islamic Arabia were investigated in relation to the prototypical idea of the mahala as an island based on intrinsic social practices. Examples demonstrate the establishment and basic idea of the mahala as creating an "interior" that contrasts with, and positions itself against, a different "exterior", not only physically and spatially but also in a metaphysical and social way. Within the idea of a decolonial island tribal islands are seen as settlements of resistance marked by their loyalty towards the local community. Nevertheless, they have also introduced a dangerous contrasting aspect of the idea of the island as a detached enclosure ruled by ethnic affiliations and patriarchal hierarchies.

So, after investigating these ancient islands of resistance against the violence of the desert and its jinn, further discussion focuses on contemporary Sarajevo, demonstrating a mahala-inspired island at the other end of the historical chronology: an island that resists the capitalisation, commodification and deregulation of urban land.

Figure 5 Plan, example of a nomad settlement based on camps in North Africa. Source: Author, 2025.

3.2 Islands of the Roma

In the hills to the west of the Ottoman centre of Sarajevo lies the green area of Crni Vrh (literally "black top"). Recognised as a one of the last forests within the urban area, it is surrounded by inter-war residential projects, a hospital complex from the 1970s (Mutevelić et al., 2023, pp. 170–171) and the development of Marijin Dvor, today's commercial downtown centre of Sarajevo.

Despite the fact that the urban plan designated the forest area as a city park, the municipality began to contest this in 2019, illegally changing the regulatory plan. Parts of the area were recategorised as land for construction (Bakija, 2023). Following this, the municipality granted permission for a luxury residential project consisting of five multi-storey blocks of privately owned flats (*Park Residence Premium Living*, 2025).

Right next to this project, in the centre of Crni Vrh's forest, lies the Roma settlement of Gorica, an arrangement of houses grouped along a cul-de-sac. Dating back to Socialist times, it occupied an area that was partly state property and partly owned by the municipality. The settlement's existence was already contested in 1986, when the Sarajevo Institute for Urban Construction (in original Bosnian *Zavod za izgradnju grada Sarajeva*) expropriated land to implement a park. Along with the war in the 1990s, this meant that many Roma houses were destroyed and residents displaced. Disputes emerged in the following years around the ownership of the land, which led the Roma community to start a campaign to claim the property by mobilising international organisations and donors and setting up public protests. As a consequence the residents were granted ownership of the land in 2002, with the municipality legally allocating it to the residents (*Report on Roma Informal Settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 2005, pp. 6–8).

Today, Gorica displays the stark contrast between communal bottom-up habitation and capitalist exploitation of land. Right next to the trench dug for the luxury residential project, the space of the cul-de-sac is used as an extension to the houses for gathering, exchange and communication. The elevated situation at the end of the street allows panoramic views of the surrounding city, a perspective that is increasingly becoming blocked, the ground literally being dug away for the construction project (Figure 6).

The precarious situation of Roma settlement islands like Gorica can be traced back to the emerging condition of the Roma community within the Ottoman empire in the Balkans. From the fourteenth century onwards Roma groups were brought into the conquests as military support groups – craftsmen, commissaries, blacksmiths and horsemen (Macura, 2009, p. 5). In the subsequent establishment of cities, they were incorporated into the administration but allocated their own areas, thus creating their own separate mahale (Vuksanović-Macura, Zlata, 2012, p. 686). They were often detached from the urban centres and positioned as independent settlements on open land. (See for instance the "Ziganka" in the map of Belgrade (Hellert, 1844).) Continuous social exclusion and segregation meant that these early Roma settlements continue up to today as insular entities detached from the surrounding urban fabric. Even newly emerging settlements immediately take on a segregated status, as they often arise on neglected or contested land, thus counteracting institutionalised urban developments (Vuksanović-Macura, Zlata, 2012, pp. 686–687).

Due to their historical emergence within the Ottoman administration of mahale, Roma settlements often have mahala-like characteristics: they consist of units of family houses (see for instance the plans of houses in (Macura, 1992, pp. 152, 155, 157)) with verandas along yards (Macura, 2009, p. 10). They consist of households that are tightly grouped together with a mutually supportive relationship between neighbours (Macura & Vuksanović, 2006, p. 21). The yards – often shared among families – are extended interiors used for everyday activities (Macura & Vuksanović, 2006, p. 22) and economic occupations, as the residents often

conduct independent entrepreneurial activity (Macura & Vuksanović, 2006, p. 35) in self-managed working conditions (Macura & Vuksanović-Macura, 2007, p. 60).

The settlement structure is defined by a densification process emerging from the unit of a singular house. Extensions and attachments are added through time, with new blocks, and even streets, emerging as the land becomes more densely covered. Within this evolution the singular plots are undergoing a process of "fragmentation through division" rather than an increase in size through addition (Macura, 2009, p. 9), (Macura, 1992, p. 134). The resulting morphology shows either loose or tight groups of houses along surrounding streets and narrow interior roads.[6] More empty and open spaces are used as communal areas for collective washing facilities around a well or fountain and as gathering spaces with benches for conversation. At these locations, monuments are often erected depicting Saint Bibija Zara (Macura & Vuksanović, 2006, p. 20). These are simple blocks of bricks displaying an icon of the saint with a small area around it enclosed by a fence (Macura, 1992, p. 148).

Roma groups display a varied spectrum of religious and cultural beliefs, depending on the surrounding hegemonic context and their individual development. Here, research is used that was carried out in Serbia to highlight the emergence of an important social practice. In many Roma communities that are of Serbian orthodox influence, legends and myths play an important role in their collective identity. This originates from tales of the emergence of Roma settlements, that are sometimes based on local family legends. Stories are told of earlier ancestors arriving at the land of settlement and thus setting up the family line in a certain area (Macura, 1992, p. 133). Similarly, the cult around Saint Bibija Zara (translated as "auntie Zara") or shortened to "Bibi", is based on myths deriving from the fifteenth century CE during the plague (B., 2025). Wandering around from settlement to settlement, Bibija performed healing acts and thus represents the protective patron saint of the family. The celebratory ritual today consists of gathering at a holy place, the monument, a cross or a tree, where gifts such as a comb, a mirror or clothes are offered to the saint (*Intangible Cultural Heritage of Serbia - Aunty Bibia*, 2023).

Unlike the better-known significant settlements such as the Deponija in Serbia (Macura, 2009) or Stolipinovo in Bulgaria (Venkov et al., 2016), in Bosnia permanent Roma settlements are rarer and smaller. They consist of compact compounds like that at Kiseljak, near Tuzla (Bešlija, 2022), Rupin Dol, at Zavidovići (Gil Guimarães, 2004), the Roma mahala near Doboj (Grbešić, 2024), or the Varda quarter in Kakanj (Report on Roma Informal Settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2005). They all demonstrate detached neighbourhoods, separated islands of local community "interiors", mostly in precarious living situations. Due to social stigmatisation and neglect by city administrations they often are also detached from wider economic, infrastructural and communal systems. Excluded from facilities and basic resources like running water or the sewage system, they are often set up illegally on privately owned or contested land, and are thus constantly in danger of destruction (Macura & Vuksanović-Macura, 2007, p. 32).

Figure 6 Plan, the Roma settlement of Gorica in Sarajevo with the trench dug for the private construction project adjacent to it, Source: Author, 2025.

These islands, based on ancestral tradition, mythical family protection and mutual neighbourly care are, in parallel, impoverished entities, segregated areas of ancestry, bloodlines and ethnic homogeneity, but also precarious islands of protest, counteracting contemporary capitalist land appropriation.

In reflecting back to the previous chapter, where the idea of the mahala as island was discussed as a colonial device, a military apparatus to gain power in border regions, this section has shown counteracting aspects of the notion. The archetypical notion of the mahala in ancient tribal Arabia, as well as contemporary remnants in today's Roma settlements, provide evidence of the mahala as a social practice, one that is able to create empowerment for local groups within challenging surroundings, a device that can be harnessed to transform the former imperial apparatus into a decolonial one. Nevertheless, one has to remember that these practices, in parallel, created enclaves, detached from their surroundings and emphasising ethnic background and homogeneity: a crucial danger that has continued to exist within the concept of the island.

In a report on the Gorica case in Sarajevo by the Human Rights Department of the OSCE, reflective lessons were established as a consequence after its successful fight for rights. These can be read as tools to be used in order to reimagine the notion of the mahala: islands must be protected, based on local solidarity among residents and

6 This can be seen, for instance, in the map of the Deponija settlement in Belgrade (Macura, 2009, p. 11) or in the Orlovsko settlement (Macura, 1992).

partnerships with governmental administrations that can introduce innovative ways of land ownership and the organisation of collective living (Report on Roma Informal Settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2005, pp. 6–8). But, as seen in the Roma example, the idea of the island contains an ambiguous state: although it fosters empowerment and rights for the local population, in the same way it can lead to detachment and segregation from the surrounding infrastructure.

Nevertheless, the "magical islands" that we have discovered can teach us that communal care and bottom-up practices based on rites, rituals and relationships can foster mutual collective rights that allow islands to be resistant, resilient and powerful for their inhabitants. These are relationships not only between people but also between inhabitants and the land they settle on. Viewed through nissological imagery, it is the ambivalent relationship of the island to its shore that allows them to exist in the first place.

4 Conclusion

"Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,
I must be here confin'd by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
Since I have my dukedom got,
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell;
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands:
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, Art to enchant [...]"

The Tempest, Epilogue (Shakespeare & Stratmann, 2025, p. 182)

Sarajevo's mahala spaces are a landscape of possibilities. Nevertheless, their condition remains rather uncertain.

This paper argues for the investigation and re-evaluation of the core spatial and social concepts of the mahala. Undertaken by looking into the history and archetypical origins of the mahala, as well as its re-emergence in Roma settlements today, the paper argued for the re-invention of the mahala's crucial concept of insularity. In analysing it as an imperial apparatus and recognising both the dangers and possibilities of urban settlement islands, the paper thus advocates for its re-interpretation as a decolonial apparatus.

This was undertaken by understanding the mahala island as a social practice that reiterates local communal "interiors" and secures them through innovative relations between inhabitants and settlement land.

The paper has addressed this endeavour in two contrasting parts.

In "Martial Islands", I presented the mahala type as an occupational device that was primarily introduced in order to control local people, as well as military affiliates in bordering imperial regions, but which, nevertheless, gave individual communities the possibility of owning land and managing their community themselves. Here, the mahala was deliberately implemented as a functional apparatus for territorial expansion under central rule.

In "Magical Islands", however, I have shown that the oldest prototypes of the mahala emerged out of the desire for ancestral tradition, mythical family protection and mutual but patriarchal care. As these aspects re-emerge in today's Roma settlements, they evidence a continuation of the idea of the mahala in contrast to its physical existence in Sarajevo, where it is a remnant of the past, stripped from its social connotations.

I have shown that the idea of the island, in parallel, is prone to creating impoverished entities, segregated areas of ethnic homogeneity, but also settlements of empowerment and protest, counteracting contemporary capitalist land appropriation. And thus I argue that the mahala type's potential lies in defining it as a social practice that can be introduced as a device to transform the former colonial apparatus into a decolonial one. This can be accomplished by learning from the mahala islands that communal care and bottom-up practices based on rites, rituals and relationships can foster mutual collective rights, as well as resistant and resilient settlements.

Consequently, the paper's main argument, by referencing nissological thinking and etymological aspects of the term "island", is to re-introduce new relationships between inhabitants and the land they settle on. This can be accomplished through concentrating on three main aspects within the ideas of relationality; the relationality of inhabitants to their land: introducing territorial autonomy for settlements, allowing local inhabitants to claim land; setting up a relational infrastructure enabling solidarity and exchange between island units, and negotiating and administering an institutional recognition of the island in order to protect them from erasure. It is an impetus to implement some of the magic of the (mahala) island to reassess and reinterpret today's aspects of collective living in Sarajevo – and possibly in other cities, too.

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