Islamic Pilgrimage in the Middle East: An Overview

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1. Introduction

Pilgrimage constitutes one of the five fundamental religious obligations incumbent on every Muslim, known as the "pillars of Islam." It is based on Qurʾanic verses which call upon the believers to visit Mecca on designated days of the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar and participate in a series of rituals. This paper will explain how the pre-Islamic rites of the visitation of the shrine of the Black Stone in Mecca (the Kaʿba) came to be so central for the religion that strived to obliterate the pagan practices of the Arabs, moreover, a hallmark of the unity and piety of Muslims until today. Following the discussion of the rituals of the five-days-long *ḥajj* and their symbolic, historical, and mystical interpretations, I will point out some of the customs that accompanied the departing caravans and returning pilgrims in Middle Eastern cities. A discussion of other types of Islamic pilgrimage, Sunni and Shiʿi, will follow, with a focus on the visitation of Medina, Jerusalem, Karbala and Najaf, and the formation of an elaborate Islamic sacred geography in the medieval Middle East. Therein, I will attempt to explain how travel to a wide variety of sacred places, and especially the visitation of graves (*ziyārat al-qubūr*) – ranging from the mausolea of renown religious figures to rural shrines dedicated to almost anonymous local saints – became such a widespread phenomenon in the later medieval Middle East. Some sites developed into loci of annual communal celebrations known as *mawālid* ("birthdays") or *mawāsim* (seasonal festivals) combining religious devotions with socialization, commerce, and amusement of sorts. In the twentieth century, against the backdrop of nation-building projects and national conflicts in the Middle East, some pilgrimages became highly politicized. A couple of examples from Mandatory Palestine will demonstrate this point. Most modern movements that advocated renewal and reform in Islam, whether modernist or fundamentalist, however, considered the visitation of sacred shrines and the veneration of tombs as un-Islamic and unwarranted. Some advocates of the "purification" of Islam from these practices reiterated the harsh criticism of the medieval theologian and jurisconsult Ibn Taymiyya, who condemned the practice of *ziyāra*, and even played out their iconoclasm in violent destruction of sacred sites.

Pilgrimage – movement in space – is inevitably also movement in time. The Qurʾan calls upon the believers to observe a strictly lunar calendar, addressing the new moons (*al-ahilla*) as "appointed times for the people and the pilgrimage" (Q. 2:189), and condemning intercalation as one of the grave misdeeds of the pagan Arabs (Q. 9:37). The latter are accused of having added a month to God's created annual cycle of twelve months (which is eleven days shorter than the solar year) whenever they had wished to delay "God's peace" – i.e., the time for pilgrimage – for their own convenience. As a result, they observed the *ḥajj* on the wrong days, rendering the sacred profane and the profane sacred.

Medieval Muslim scholars stress that the abolition of leap years and reverting to a purely lunar calendar at the advent of Islam restored the divinely prescribed "natural order" and ensured the timely observation of the sacred rites of the *ḥajj*. Modern scholars of Islam present the establishment of a purely lunar calendar as an attempt to break away from the pagan past and to carve out a separate and unique identity vis-à-vis the other monotheistic religions. Moreover, as means for the creation of a strictly monotheistic identity, unequivocally denying any intrinsic value to the forces of nature and the agricultural seasons. Another etic interpretation of this historical reform is suggested by Hideyuki Ioh, who points out that Muhammad had changed the traditional pilgrimage and trading system in Arabia by the adoption of the purely lunar calendar, triggering vast societal changes which facilitated the establishment of the new Islamic order.[1]

This order, according to the Qurʾan and *ḥadith*, allowed for only two festivals: one celebrated with the completion of the obligatory month-long dawn-to-sunset fast of Ramadan (the ninth month), and the other – immediately after the pilgrimage to Mecca, on the 10th-14th of Dhū al-Ḥijja (the twelfth month). With time, the addition of annual commemorations of events in the life of the Prophet and visitations of sacred sites of sorts, significantly changed the nature of this calendar, and the lived experience of Muslims.

2. The *Ḥajj*

Every adult free Muslim who is physically and mentally healthy, male or female, is obliged to perform the *ḥajj* at least once in a lifetime. The *ḥajj* begins with *iḥrām* – a ritual of purification which ideally includes not only bodily cleansing but also detaching oneself wholeheartedly from everything but God. Purified, the pilgrim dons a special garment for the entire period of the *ḥajj*. Men wear two white seamless cloths, tied in a certain way. It symbolizes purity, spirituality, and – according to interpreters who liken the *ḥajj* to one's journey in the afterlife – shrouds worn after death. It also stresses the equality of all

believers and their common liminal status while guests in God's house in Mecca. Women wear ordinary modest ("*sharʿi*") clothes, and leave their hands and face uncovered. The state of *iḥrām* requires also refraining from carrying weapons, killing animals, damaging plants, clipping the nails, shaving, the use of perfume, and sexual relations. It allows entry into the sacred precincts of Mecca and the participation in the ritual circumambulation of the black stone (*tawāf*) – the first rite of the *ḥajj*.

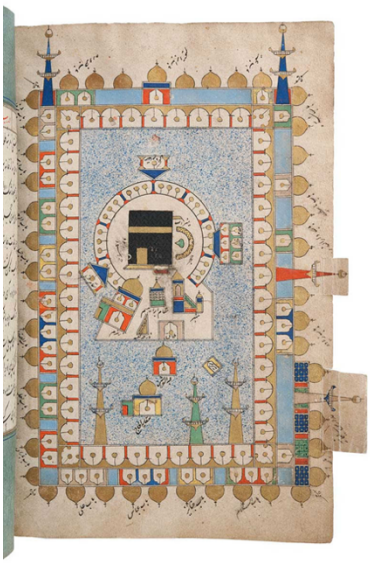

Fig. 1 Drawing of the Kaʿba, from a sixteenth-century illustrated manuscript of *Futūḥ al-Ḥaramayn* by al-Anṣarī. (Photo: Avshalom Avital, courtesy of the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Jerusalem, Israel)

While the Qurʾan fully acknowledges the takeover of the shrine and its cult from the pagans, it "Islamizes" it by attributing its establishment to Abraham, the first Prophet of monotheism, and to his son Ishmael, the father of all Arabs. This is spelled out in the following verse: "We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael: 'Purify My House for those that shall go about it and those that cleave to it, to those who bow and prostrate themselves'" (Q. 2: 124–127, trans. A. J. Arberry). Early Islamic history portrays the Muslims cleansing the Kaʿba of 360 idols upon the conquest of Mecca in 630 CE, restoring the shrine to its original purpose and purifying it from generations of contamination by idol-worship.

Later *ḥadith* literature exposes some qualms early Muslims had regarding the continuation of rites such as the kissing of the black stone. Several strands of explaining

away any pagan content of the pilgrimage were developed by Muslim commentators. Most popular until this day is the presentation of the rites as a reenactment of the story of Abraham, Ishmael, and Hagar. According to this narrative, the brisk walk between the "hills" of Safa and Marwa is done seven times in memory of Hagar's quest for water in the desert for her anguished son. In similar vein, the throwing of stones at three piles at Mina commemorates the capture of the ram Abraham sacrificed rather than his son. Mystical Islam prefers the way of allegorical exegesis, with some Sufis addressing the *ḥajj* as a "pilgrimage to the essence of oneness"; running between al-Safa and al-Marwa as running away from the temptations of the devil, and the throwing of stones as combatting with one's base desires.[2]

Modern Muslim commentators stress the value of the *ḥajj* as a great get-together of Muslims from all the corners of the earth, underscoring their unity and fraternity. A twentieth-century participant in the *ḥajj*, the famous African American activist known as Malcom X (1925-1965), describes the overwhelming sense of belonging he had experienced in Mecca in the following passage: "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white."[3]

Whatever meaning is attributed to the *ḥajj* by the believer who performs it, scholars of Islamic history are unanimous regarding the benefits of the choice of the sanctuary of Mecca as a focal point for the nascent Muslim *umma* (nation). Its absorption into Islam neutralized much of the resistance of its erstwhile Meccan keepers and priests, gave the new religion a distinct sacred place of its own, and a powerful communal religious celebration. The latter was shared, to an extent, also by Muslims who did not leave for Mecca, but congregated along the route to accompany the departing pilgrims or welcome them back, expecting to partake in the blessings (*baraka*) of the sacred place by touching men who had been there, and the objects, food, or water – especially water from the sacred Zamzam well – they carried with them.

Muʿawiyya (r. 661-680), the fifth caliph of the Islamic state, is said to have been the first to provide the Kaʿba with a new cloth covering (*kiswa*) with each year's caravan. This became a tradition. The annual delivery from Egypt of a *kiswa* adorned with bands of gold-thread embroidery of Qurʾanic verses and pious phrases, probably goes back to the tenth century. In the thirteenth century a new element – a decorated empty palanquin

known as the *maḥmal* – joined the Egyptian procession, and until the demise of this tradition in 1953, remained the centerpiece of the yearly caravan to Mecca. It resembled a tent made of embroidered yellow silk, crowned with a spherical finial made of gilded silver. Shreds cut off from the *kiswa* were a sought-after relic,[4] since, in the understanding of many practitioners, if blessings could be transferred by objects that had been at a holy site, all the more so by a ritual object of such stature.

Fig. 2 A Stencil lithograph from the second half of the 19th century, portraying Muslim pilgrims departing from Egypt for Mecca, followed by a camel carrying an ornate yellow *maḥmal*. The Arabic inscription at the bottom reads: This is the Egyptian noble *maḥmal* constructed by the King al-Zahir Baybars in Cairo in 675/1276. (British Museum, AN1321871001, © The Trustees of the British Museum)

3. The Visitation (*Ziyāra*) of Medina and Jerusalem

An oft-quoted *ḥadith* cites the Prophet restricting travel for devotional purposes to three destinations: the sacred mosque of Mecca, the Prophet's mosque in Medina, and al-Masjid al-Aqṣa –the "furthest mosque" [in Jerusalem]. Muslim scholars and scholars of Islam have offered several interpretations for this saying, which seems to discourage or even forbid visitation of all other sacred sites, promise recompense for the visitation of

these three mosques, or rate the importance of the three cities in descending order. The superior sanctity of Mecca is unquestioned. It is reflected clearly in the unique demand to wear the special *iḥrām* garments upon crossing the pilgrimage boundary, and the ban on the entrance of non-Muslims to the entire city (a prohibition that has not prevented Christian adventurers to disguise themselves as Muslims later and publish their experience of the *ḥajj* in travelogues).

Medina, formerly known as Yathrib, had no sanctity prior to Muhammad's emigration (*hijra*) to it in 622 – an event that was chosen, some twenty years later, as the starting point of the Islamic calendar discussed above. Having served as a haven for the Muslims who had left Mecca with the Prophet, it remained his home and headquarters until his death, thereby acquiring an especially dear place in the hearts of Muslims. There is hardly a Muslim who would not visit Medina on his way to or from the *ḥajj* and pay tribute to the Prophet at the complex which includes his house, mosque and grave.

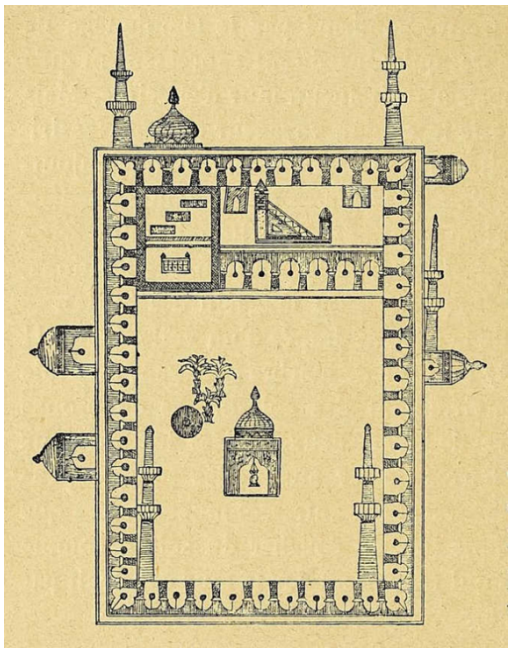

Fig. 3 A fourteenth-century miniature of the Mosque of Medina, with the Prophet's pulpit (*minbar*), the Prophet's grave alongside the graves of the caliphs Abu Bakr and ʿUmar, and the "tree of Fatima," his daughter. A well-known *ḥadith* cited the Prophet saying: "Between my grave and my pulpit is one of the gardens of Paradise." According to another *hadith*, the Prophet had declare that whoever visits his grave is considered to have visited him during his life. (Albert Gayet, *L'Art Arabe*, Paris: Librairies Imprimeries Réunies 1891, p. 22)

The belief in the Prophet's privileged role as intecessor before God, and in the special efficacy of seeking his intercession in Medina was deeply entrenched and widespread. It is related, for example, in the following story by the ninth-century poet al-ʿUtbi, who authenticates his claim with a Qurʾanic verse: "I was sitting by the grave of the Prophet when a Bedouin came and said: Peace be upon you, oh Messenger of God. I heard that God said: If only, when wronging themselves, they had come to you and asked God's forgiveness, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found God to be pardoning and compassionate [Q. 4: 64]. Therefore, I came to you to ask for forgiveness for my sins by asking for your intercession with God."[5]

A unique society of eunuchs who served as the guardians of the Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina was established in the later twelfth century, to be dissolved only several decades ago. The eunuchs oversaw the space and objects that transmitted the Prophet's *baraka*, inspired awe and ensured proper behavior in the sacred place.[6] It was considered disrespectful to raise one's voice, nap, stretch feet in the direction of the tomb, or turn one's back to it.

Personal prayer of sorts (*istighfār*, *duʿāa*, *nawāfil*) was undoubtedly the main ritual that was conducted by the Prophet's tomb, and by the tombs of other men and women who were considered to possess intercessory powers. Putting their faith in the continuous presence of the holy figure on site, and in the *baraka* of the shrine, devotees uttered fervent and on occasion tearful prayers and private invocations at shrines. Some of them circumambulated the tombstone, touched the cover or the railing that protected it, recited the Qurʾan or an appropriate poem, and often took oaths which may have included a promise to return to the shrine and to make donations for its illumination, decoration, and upkeep. People who could not make a personal visit to the Prophet's tomb would send him letters with pilgrims who left for the holy cities of Arabia.[7]

Medina is frequently mentioned in a literary genre written in praise of places (*faḍāʾil al-amkina*), which was developed by Sunni and Shiʿi compilers since the ninth century. A typical strategy of establishing hierarchy between sacred places is the comparison of the efficacy of performing devotions there. Sayings such as: "Prayer in Mecca equals 100,000 prayers in Medina; prayer in Median equals 1,000 prayers in Jerusalem, and prayer in Jerusalem is worth 500 prayers in any other place," are a case in point, reflecting the gradient of sanctity we have mentioned earlier.

If the *fadāʾil* imply a notion of eminent or inherent sanctity, the great medieval

scholars Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) appear to have had a different notion, which is rather striking in its relativity. Al-Ghazzālī, who was very much inclined towards mysticism, explains that the virtues of sacred sites, including even the holiest cities of Mecca and Medina, are enhanced by the arrival of pilgrims and the amassment of their prayers. Hence, he seems to be drawing a bilateral relationship between the devout and their destination. Ibn Taymiyya, a theologian and jurisconsult (who is extremely influential today in all strands of fundamentalist Islam), regards the sanctity of places to be a temporal phenomenon that is contingent upon historical developments, such as changing borders and population flows. He argues that a land may be praised (*yuḥmadu*) or disparaged (*yudhammu*) at different times, depending on the spiritual status (*ḥāl*) of its inhabitants. It might be an abode of Islam and righteousness at one time, and an abode of apostasy and infidelity at another, just as Mecca "was an abode of war and apostasy when Medina became an abode of belief, a destination for migration (*hijra*), and a place for those who guard Islamic territory (*ribāṭ*)." After its conquest, per Ibn Taymiyya, Mecca became an abode of Islam, and Medina was no longer an abode of *hijra* and *ribāṭ*, as it had been earlier.

The city listed third in *ḥadith shadd al-rihāl* is Jerusalem, known to have been the first direction of prayer for the nascent Muslim community, a fact that clearly reflected an awareness of its special status for members of the older monotheistic religions –Judaism and Christianity – who were explicitly invited, at an early stage of Muhammad's mission, to join the prayers. Although abandoned as the direction of prayer in favor of Mecca sometime after Muhammad's arrival in Media, Jerusalem retained a place of pride in Islamic sacred geography and sacred history. The foundations of its special status were formulated in commentaries on the Qurʾan, biographies of the Prophet, *ḥadith* collections and *fadāʾil* treatises. They were rooted, as it were, in creation, in the days of the prophets of old, in the biography of Muhammad, and in eschatological events yet to come. Jerusalem was imagined as a channel of enhanced accessibility to God, wherein his mercy is exceedingly bountiful, promising the remission of sins and the multiplication of recompenses for the performance of a wide variety of religious devotions.

The most important miraculous event that ties the Muslims to Jerusalem is, of course, Muhammad's visit of the city during his night journey. It is depicted, according to most commentators on the Qurʾan: “Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque the precincts of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. He is the All-hearing, the All-seeing" (17:1).

The ancient rock, which allegedly shows the footprint the Prophet Muhammad had left on it before ascending to the heavenly throne during that night journey, was covered by a beautiful dome some seventy years after his death. The monument became the major attraction for Muslim pilgrims to Jerusalem. The main purpose of that unprecedentedly sumptuous octagonal shrine (which was not constructed as a proper mosque) is a matter of debate among medieval and modern historians. Some art historians believe that its current role as commemorating the Prophet's ascension to heaven was a later addition onto earlier functions. These include the celebration of Islam's victory over Christianity and Judaism by outshining local churches, or perhaps over Byzantium, by imitating Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, or the ancient Temple of David and Solomon in Jerusalem. Considering the specific political circumstances at the time of its execution, it may have been built as an alternative pilgrimage destination, for diverting Syrian Muslims from going on pilgrimage to Mecca. Be it as it may, the Dome of the Rock was coupled, after several years, by the Mosque of al-Aqṣa, which later gave its name to the whole sacred esplanade, when addressed in Arabic.

The sacred topography of the esplanade was modified under the Fatimids in the eleventh century. While restoring the damage brought by a series of earthquakes in the first decades of the eleventh century, the Fatimid rulers of Jerusalem added a number of smaller buildings to the sacred precincts: the chamber of David, the Mosque of the Cradle of Jesus, and the Gate of Gabriel. The first extant guide for the Muslim pilgrim in Jerusalem, written around 1040, recommends ritual prayer and supererogatory prayer at all those sites, stressing the Qurʾanic theme of repentance and reward. It also recommends prayer at the Church of the Ascension on Mount Olives, which apparently was a popular visiting place for Muslims (despite sharp criticism from some Muslim religious authorities), in imitation of the prayer Prophet ʿIsā (i.e. Jesus) offered "when God made him ascend to heaven."

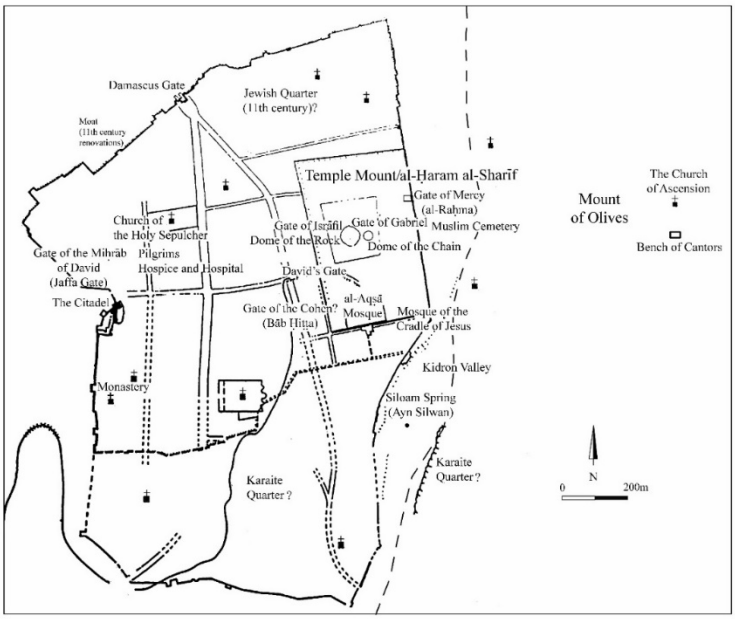

Fig. 4 Jerusalem in the eleventh century. (Drawing: Patrice Kaminsky, based on Amikam Elad's map of eleventh-century Jerusalem)

Eleventh-century Jerusalem was a destination of pilgrimage that "never for a day are its streets empty of strangers,"[8] an *axis mundi* and spiritual hub for all three monotheistic creeds. Its conquest by the Crusaders in 1099, after which Jews and Muslims (with the exception of some individuals) were denied access to the holy esplanade for nearly ninety years, changed its character considerably. With its return to Islamic sovereignty, further reconstruction work took place on the "Noble Sanctuary," which had become even dearer and holier to Muslim visitors after its loss.

A short autobiographical passage that connects the re-Islamized Jerusalem with Mecca through a pilgrim's itinerary was written by the historian Ibn Wāṣil, a native of Mosul: "That year (642/1227), while he was in Jerusalem, dwelling at the Madrasa [educational institution] of al-Ṣālihiyya, my father wrote to the Sultan and asked his permission to go to the *ḥajj*. The permission was given, and my father donned the special *ḥajj* garment (*iḥram*) in the Dome of the Rock and travelled to Mecca. He performed the rites of the pilgrimage and stayed at Mecca until the following year's pilgrimage caravan, returning to Jerusalem only in 626/1228. During these months," says Ibn Wāṣil, "I occupied his place at the Madrasa."[9]

4. Visitation of Shrines and Sanctuaries (*mashāhid* and *maqāmāt*)

While travel to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem could be undertaken only by the privileged few, a visit to a nearby holy site was feasible for many. Due to the spread-out belief in the persistence of the powers of charismatic saintly men after their death, tombs –ranging from the mausoleum of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina to modest rural sanctuaries commemorating almost anonymous local figures of some renown –became destinies of pilgrimage. The establishment of mausolea, often inspired by a dream or an apparition, became an act of piety (and political expediency), for rulers and commoners. The landscape of the Middle East was dotted with shrines, typically modest domed buildings, which sometimes developed into elaborate complexes.

Fig. 5 Tomb of Shaykh Muhammad al-Mawṣili, said to have miraculously joined Saladin's forces at a crucial moment and attained martyrdom, by the ruins of Ascalon (southern Palestine). (Source: Liet. Kitchener's photographs (courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund in London, 1875)

In twelfth-thirteenth century Syria, visits to tombs of prophets of old, members of the Prophet's family, martyrs of Muhammad's campaigns in Arabia, warriors of the Great Conquests, and victims of the Counter-Crusade and of later feats of jihad and *ribat* (defense of borderlands and strongholds) became a popular feature of religious life. Under the Ayyubids and Mamluks new sacred sites were being added on to the traditional inventory in unprecedented pace, as a consequence of both the appropriation and transformation of older Christian and Jewish or abandoned sites, as well as the establishment of new ones. Some medieval historians openly admit that the aura of sanctity of quite a few pilgrimage sites in Syria originated in pre-Islamic times. The

geographer Ibn Shaddād (thirteenth century) explains, for example, that a certain shrine in Northern Syria was part of a pagan fire-sanctuary in antiquity. Later, it was sanctified by the Jews, and then by Christians (who claimed that Jesus, or the apostles, had visited the place). Finally, the Muslims appropriated the sanctuary. Ibn Shaddād attributes a reminiscent, though much shorter genealogy to another shrine in the same area, saying that while it was in the hands of "the Christians and Franks," a large Christian crowd would go up there every spring. When the Muslims regained control of the shrine, they began to venerate the place "twice as much as the Christians."

The competition over the Holy Land in the era of crusade and counter-crusade undoubtedly accelerated the process described above in the Levant, but so did the spread of Sufism all over the Muslim world. Mystical Islam was characterized by great admiration towards ascetics and mystics. The abodes of Sufi shaykhs who were perceived as saintly friends of God drew visitors seeking spiritual council, intercession of sorts, blessing and healing, inspiration and revitalization of faith, an apparition, or a numinous experience. Some came to participate in Sufi communal rites. The saint's abode or mosque often retained its magnetism as it became the site of his tomb. Sufi shrines were also erected for the purpose of commemorating the deeds and safeguarding the relics of saintly figures, without necessarily enclosing a tomb.

Mausolea of prophets acknowledged in more than one religious tradition, such as al- Ḥaram al-Khalīlī (the Cave of the Patriarchs) in Hebron, had a long history of visitation. In an autobiographical note, al-Ghazzālī reports to have visited the tomb of Abraham during his sojourn in Jerusalem (around 1090). Standing before the epitaph of the Prophet, he proclaimed a solemn vow (which he later did not uphold): "Never to go before any ruler, never to accept the money of a ruler, and never to engage in theological disputation or religious partisanship."[10]

Another vow taken in the same place three centuries later was that of the grandmother of the Mamluk administrator and author Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī. By his time, the sanctity of Hebron for Muslims seems to have grown. When Saladin recaptured the city from the Franks in 1187, he provided for its restoration and appointed an imam, two muezzins and servants for the Ḥaram. One of his heirs enlarged the complex a couple of decades later. In 664/1265 the Mamluk sultan Baybars enhanced its Islamic character by forbidding entry to Christians and Jews (who until then were admitted to the sanctuary of Abraham upon payment). It became a popular destination on the route from Jerusalem to Mecca and Medina, a route that enabled the devout to visit two great Prophets on their

way to the *ḥajj*.

Ibn Shāhīn 's grandmother came to Hebron for a concrete purpose: to secure the birth of a healthy son who would survive the precarious years of infancy. She visited al-Ḥaram al-Khalīlī by night, rubbed her belly against Prophet Abraham's tombstone, and vowed to donate a large sum of money to the poor. She also promised to call the child by the Prophet's epithet: Khalīl (friend [of God]). When the boy was born, she fulfilled her two vows and made another one: to throw the costly golden earing she had attached to the baby's ear into "*ṣundūq al-nadhr li-sayyidina al-Khalīl*" – the charity box at the sanctuary of Hebron - on his seventh birthday. Her scheme obviously worked well: the son of Khalīl lived to tell her story.[11]

Umm Khalīl was obviously undeterred by the recurrent prohibition on women's visits to mausolea and cemeteries, voiced by scholars and sometimes also by rulers.. Its repetition in the medieval texts undoubtedly indicates the popularity of this allegedly forbidden custom among women, for whom the liminal space of the graveyard and shrine enabled sidestepping the tight control of male authority, especially at night. As we see in this anecdote, it was also an occasion to strike a deal with the Almighty, and to gain extra merit by the distributing of alms to the poor.[12]

5. Criticism of Ziyāras

Ibn Taymiyya penned over a hundred treatises against tomb veneration and the visitation of sacred places other than the pilgrimage explicitly prescribed in the Qurʾan. He often cited the prophetic *ḥadith* whereby God will spill his wrath on the Jews and Christians for turning the graves of their prophets into places of prayer. Deliberate travel to graves and other alleged holy places for the sake of prayer or visitation was reprehensible in his mind and he stressed that the effort devotees invest in supplication, rather than its location, determines its acceptance by God. All things being equal, so Ibn Taymiyya argued, praying by a cross would have the same outcome as prayer at a so-called sacred place!

Ibn Taymiyya recurrently claimed that the identification of numerous venerated tombs of prophets, Companions and Muhammad's kin was based on unreliable stories, dreams and marvels, and other purported "signs." Having said that, he emphasized that there is absolutely no *sharʿī* obligation to determine the burial sites of the prophets or members of Muhammad's kin. One can believe in these figures, evoke their memory, and pray for (but certainly not to) them in the absence of such knowledge and without

undertaking travel to their alleged shrines.

Such fierce opposition to the visitation of sacred places was hardly the majority view in Ibn Taymiyya's times, and he encountered stiff resistance from rank-and-file Muslims and religious scholars alike. The latter were supported by the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, who had him jailed for his insolence. While many *ʿulamā* criticized improper behavior at cemeteries and mausolea, they did not object to the visitation of graves per se, as did he. In fact, many of them partook in *ziyāra*s themselves (see al-Ghazzālī) and believed that certain aspects of this practice were advisable and beneficial.

Ibn Taymiyya's views were, however, adopted with enthusiasm by the militant Wahhābī reform movement in the nineteenth century, so much so that when the Wahhābīs gained control over Medina, they destroyed the Prophet's tomb to prevent Muslims from performing pilgrimage to Medina and venerating it. ISIS, driven by the same iconoclastic ideology, destroyed some thirty medieval shrines in Syria and in Iraq. Both movements especially targeted Shiʿi shrines and pilgrimage destinations. This too is in line with the teaching of Ibn Taymiyya, whose ferocious anti-Shiʿism was based, among others, on the accusation of the Shiʿis with implanting the misguided practice of tomb worship among the Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya dates the spread of this cult to the tenth century, when Shiʿi dynasties ruled significant parts of the Islamic central lands, and indeed patronized the establishment of Shiʿi shrines and initiated public worship of Shiʿi rituals. Interestingly, some contemporary art-historians also tend to attribute to Shiʿa Islam a prominent role in the development of monumental funerary architecture, typical of pilgrimage destinations in Muslim lands.

6. Shiʿi Pilgrimage

Visitation of tombs of members of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*) and of the imams and members of their families has indeed always been pivotal to Shiʿis. It is not confined to specific days, though there are some especially auspicious dates for visitation, such as the anniversaries of the martyrdom of imams. Embedded in theology and regarded as an act of covenant renewal between the believer and his imam, such visits are an integral part of Shiʿi rite. They also carry an important educational purpose, preserving Shiʿi collective memory and distinct historical narrative of persecution and sacrifice.

For many Shiʿis, shrines in Karbala in honor of al-Ḥusayn (d. 680), the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Shiʿi Imam for all Muslims, are emotionally more important sites of pilgrimage than Mecca. Visitation of Karbala had

gained importance since the early fifteenth-century institution of Shiʿism as state religion in Iran, the massive conversion to Shiʿa in Iraq in the nineteenth century, and the proliferation of printed manuals for pilgrims in the twentieth century. One of these manuals recommends the following greeting for pilgrims to Najaf, upon entry to the shrine of ʿAli (d. 661), al-Ḥusayn's father and the third caliph of the Muslims, who was venerated as the first Imam of the Shiʿa. "Peace be upon you O commander of the faithful, the servant of God and the brother of the Prophet… Your slave... has come to seek your protection and has proceeded to your sacred sanctuary and holy place seeking God's favor through you. Shall I come in O my Lord? Shall I come in O commander of the faithful? Shall I come in O proof of God? Shall I come in O trustee of God? Shall I come in O angels of God who are present in this shrine?"[13] Shiʿi poetry also depicts angels in shrines: delegations of angels who visit the Imam, greet the pilgrims who come to mourn for him, escort and protect them, and – most importantly – intercede on their behalf for the remission of all their sins.

Shrines in honor of al-Ḥusayn, ʿAli's second son, may be found in a number of localities in the Middle East, some of which are frequented by Sunnis as well. This phenomenon goes back to the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries), when both Sunnis and Shiʿis patronized ʿAlid shrines and cared for their upkeep. A case in point is the cenotaph commemorating the burial of his severed head in the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus and in Masjid Sayyidna al-Ḥusayn in Cairo. Sunni rulers who initiated the construction and reconstruction and reparations of ʿAlid monuments must have found these undertakings also politically advantageous, whether to assert Sunni presence at shrines dedicated to the family of the Prophet, or even appropriate them, whether to co-opt local Shiʿis and promote co-existence in shared spaces. Some such sites have retained their sanctity throughout the centuries despite sectarian tensions and major political, religious, cultural, and demographical transitions in the region.

Fig. 6 Entrance to shrine of the head of al-Ḥusayn in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus. (Photo: Stephennie Mulder)

7. Pilgrimage Politicized

Travel to sacred places and worship therein have always had secular and political dimensions, being sites of commerce, amusement, competing social hierarchies, and power struggles of various scales. In the twentiethcentury, against the backdrop of nation-building projects and national conflicts in the Middle East, some pilgrimages became highly politicized. A couple of examples from Mandatory Palestine (1918-1948) demonstrate this point. As the case of Jerusalem is well-known, I will shortly survey the visitation of more peripheral shrines: Nabī Mūsā (a large Mamluk-Ottoman complex in the vicinity of Jericho, allegedly marking the tomb of Moses) and Mashhad Raʾs al-Ḥusayn (the shrine of the head of al-Ḥusayn in Ascalon). The latter site has been the focus of my research for a decade or so, and I have traced its history from the "discovery" of the head and the establishment of the shrine by a Fatimid Shiʿi-Ismaʿili ruler in the late eleventh century, through its reconstruction by a late Ottoman (Sunni) caliph, and until its destruction by the IDF in the aftermath of the 1948 war. Under the Ottomans, both sites have become the focus of a *mawsim* – an annual festival celebrated according to the Gregorian rather than *hijri* calendar, in springtime, just before Easter.

Late Ottoman *mawāsim* began with long processions of men, women, and children in their best clothes, accompanied by members of Sufi orders and derwishes, local dignitaries and representatives of the Sultan, banners of sorts, scouts, and musicians. Many pilgrims stayed on site for several days and engaged in Qurʾan recitation, Sufi *dhikr*, *dabka,* fertility and healing rites, sacrificial slaughter and feasting, almsgiving, singing folk songs, listening to sermons, and chanting religious poetry. Some brought with them small personal belongings or canisters of water or oil, in the expectation that these items will be

affected by the blessings of the sanctuary and carry *baraka* back home, or onto others.

Since 1920, Nabī Mūsā gained the reputation of being a hotbed of nascent Palestinian nationalism. The main procession to the complex always started by the al-Aqṣa Mosque in Jerusalem, where the chanting of anti-British and anti-Zionist slogans was prone to be accompanied – once in a while –by violent attacks on Jewish and sometimes also Christian by-passers and celebrants of Easter and Passover. In the 1930s and 1940s the *mawsim* at the shrine in Ascalon, heretofore only of local rural prominence, also evolved into a celebration of Palestinian patriotism and resistance on a broader national scale. At the two sites, religious preachers and politicians repeatedly addressed not only the revered patrons of the shrine (Prophet Mūsā and the martyr al-Ḥusayn), but also glorified Saladin, the pious military commander who liberated the land from the Crusaders in1187, thereby becoming a Palestinian national hero and patron of the annual visitations of Palestinian sacred sites.

Fig. 7 Celebration of *mawsim* in the courtyard of Mashhad Raʾs al-Ḥusayn, by the ruins of Ascalon, April 1943. (Source: Library of Congress, Matson (Eric G. and Edith) Photograph Collection, LC-DIG-matpc–21685)

Further reading:

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4 Richard McGregor, "Dressing the Kaʼba from Cairo: The Aesthetics of Pilgrimage to Mecca," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (David Morgan, ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 260.

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6 Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

7 Marion Holmes Katz, "The Prophet Muhammad in Ritual," in *The Cambridge Companion to Muhammad* (Jonathan E. Brockopp, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 139-157.

8 This is an observation made by the Jerusalemite geographer al-Muqaddasi at the end of the tenth century, seconded by the Persian traveler Nasir-i-Khusraw, almost a century later.

9 Translated in: Yehoshua Frenkel, "Ayyubid and Mamluk Historiography: Eyewitness Accounts by Several Contemporaries," in *Continuity and Change in the Realms of Islam* (Kristof D'Hulster and Jo van Steenbergen, eds., Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 256-7.

10 I thank Deborah Tor for this anecdote, translated from the Persian *Faḍāʾil al-Anām.*

11 *Ibn Shahin, Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik wa-Bayān al-Ṭuruq wa-l-masālik* (ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salam Tadmuri, ed., Sidon and Beirut 2011, 7-8 (introduction).

12 Marion Holmes Katz, *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 142.

13 *Guide to the Noble City of Najaf* (Najaf, 1966), trans. in: Itzhaq Naqash, "The Visitation of Shrines of the Imams and the Shiʿi Mujtahids in the Early Twentieth Century," *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995), 153-164.