SACRED PLACE AND SACRED TIME IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC MIDDLE EAST

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East
A particular feature of medieval Islamic civilisation was its wide horizons. The Muslims fell heir not only to the Graeco-Roman world of the Mediterranean, but also to that of the ancient Near East, to the empires of Assyria, Babylon and the Persians; and beyond that, they were in frequent contact with India and China to the east and with black Africa to the south. This intellectual openness can be sensed in many interrelated fields of Muslim thought, and it impacted powerfully on trade and on the networks that made it possible. Books in this series reflect this openness and cover a wide range of topics, periods and geographical areas.

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Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East

A Historical Perspective

Daniella Talmon-Heller
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Map of the Middle East, with locations mentioned in the text.
Introduction

God, the Sublime, assigned an angel known as the Summoner [al-dāʾī] to the seventh sky. On each and every night of the month of Rajab, from nightfall to sunrise, that angel calls out: ‘Blessings [tūbā] to those who remember God, blessings to those who worship [Him]’. And God answers: ‘I am one with those who seek Me, accommodating with those who obey Me, forgiving to those who ask for My forgiveness. The month [of Rajab] is My month, the worshipper is My worshipper, and the mercy is My mercy. On this month, I answer those who beseech Me, I fulfill the requests of those who entreat Me, and I guide those who ask for My guidance. I have made this month a rope that connects between Me and My devotees. Those who cling to it will reach Me’.

Ibn Tawus (d. 664/1266)¹

The way Ibn Tawus uses this vivid Qurʾanic image of a physical link between God and the faithful² calls to mind Mircea Eliade’s depiction of holy places as symbolic ladders, pillars, or mountains that connect the earth to heaven; the axis mundi in the imagined sacred geography of various cultures.³ In the quotation above, it is a sacred time rather than a sacred place that bridges the enormous gap between heaven and earth, using the image of ḥabl Allāh (the rope of God). It is included in chapter seven of Ibn Tawus’s al-Iqāb al-ʿālāʾl-ʿālā al-Māl al-ʿĀsana (Devoting Oneself to Good Works), a bulky compendium of supererogatory prayers and devotions for special days on the Islamic calendar, arranged by month. With respect to Rajab, the author, a renowned Shiʿi Imami scholar,⁴ recommends visiting shrines (ziyārat al-mashāhid), particularly those associated with al-Husayn (the martyred grandson of the Prophet), on the first and fifteenth of the month. He
considers these days no less than God’s ‘most blessed and cherished time (ahābb al-awqāt)’, as well as the anniversary of seminal events, such as the beginning of the Prophet’s mission and the marriage of his daughter Fatima to ‘Ali. Hence, he offers his readers a rather lengthy text for personal supplication at Husayni shrines on those particular days of Rajab (fī hādhā al-miqāt). The supplication opens with the following words: ‘Praise to God for allowing us to witness the shrine of His saintly friends (awliyāʾihi) on Rajab, and obliging us to fulfill our duties towards them’.

Although it is impossible to ascertain whether the rituals prescribed by Ibn Tawus were in fact observed on a regular basis – he claims that his grandfather used to perform them, but also admits the need to urge other believers to do so – we can piece together his outlook on the merits of visiting shrines (mashhads) on special days. Various other medieval Shiʿi and Sunni Arabic sources, both pre- and post-dating al-Iqbal, allow a detailed study of particular shrines in honour of al-Husayn and a reenactment of multiple rites of Rajab. Whereas some authors, like Ibn Tawus, encouraged the veneration of these sites and days, others bitterly opposed such practices. Their polemical works bare controversial doctrines and customs, thereby opening a window onto intra- and inter-faith competition, religious hierarchies and social tensions, as well as actual praxis.

The choice of a peripheral ‘secondary’ shrine and a ‘second-tier’ holy month, rather than of the prototypical cases of the Kaʿba and the month of Ramadan, as case-studies for an investigation into how medieval Muslims constructed sanctity seems to promise a more stimulating discussion. Rajab, like the shrines of the head of al-Husayn, was informed by an elusive, fluid, and disputed sanctity. While the practice of the hajj at the Meccan Sanctuary and the rites of fasting throughout Ramadan were fairly standardised at an early stage, there was much more leeway for devotional creativity at non-consensual shrines of saints and martyrs, and during Rajab. Moreover, ironic as it may be, I discovered that, although prescriptive works naturally devoted greater attention to the major rituals of Islam and mapped out every detail of their correct observance, they were rarely documented by medieval historians, biographers, geographers, and travellers. Such authors were more likely to record less common practices than the ‘standard fare’.

Part One of this book is devoted to expanses that were sanctified by
virtue of their association with the severed head of al-Husayn b. ‘Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet’s grandson. Al-Husayn was also the second son of the fourth caliph ‘Ali and the most illustrious martyr of Karbala in 61/680. He was to become the third of the twelve imams of the Imami (or Ithnā’ashari) Shi‘is and the second of the seven imams of the Isma‘ilis. Towards the end of the eleventh century, a shrine purportedly holding al-Husayn’s head was established in the Palestinian coastal town of Ascalon, a town with an earlier halo of sanctity, then under Fatimid Isma‘ili rule. As Ascalon fell to the Crusaders in the mid-twelfth century, the Fatimids transferred the relic to Cairo and interred it in a new shrine. In Part One, I reconstruct the various narratives concerning the establishment of these two shrines and the artifacts that they housed. This part also describes the itineraries and rituals of visitors to the sites as ‘thickly’ as the sources allow, and it discusses the devotional and polemical discourses concerning the shrines’ authenticity. Both shrines continued to be revered under the Sunni Ayyubids (1172–1250), Mamluks (1250–1517), and Ottomans (1517–1918). They have retained their sanctity also throughout the twentieth century and in contemporary Egypt and Israel, despite major political, religious, cultural, and even geographical transitions.

Turbulent history makes the shrine[s] of al-Husayn’s head an intriguing case-study for examining the well-known phenomenon of the durability of sacred places. Peter Brown, the renowned historian of Late Antiquity, explains the methodological problematics concerning the automatic assumption of continuity with a wonderful simile. ‘To explain the Christian cult of the martyrs as the continuation of the pagan cult of heroes’, he asserts, ‘helps as little as to reconstruct the form and function of the late-antique Christian basilica from the few columns and capitals taken from classical buildings that are occasionally incorporated in its arcades’. 11 A few other scholars also point to the methodological pitfalls of stressing ‘stasis’ and leaving ‘ancient survivals’ unexplained, or explained away with the all-too-easy suggestion of ‘inherent’ spirituality and ‘intrinsic’ sanctity.12

Pre-dating all those works, Ignaz Goldziher points to the pre-Islamic antecedents of saint worship in Islam and offers an appealing explanation for the function of its continuity: the preservation of particular ethnic and geographical identities within the universal (or should we say global?) umma.13
‘Localized practices are the strongest support for old traditions’, writes Goldziher. He goes on to claim the long historical memory of the people:

There is the temple of a god to which people have made pilgrimages for many hundreds of years in order to worship and ask for help in need. Popular tradition does not forget the help which they sought and believed they obtained at these places.14

Addressing the replacement of a shrine in honour of one god with a shrine in honour of another, the anthropologist Samuli Schielke identifies an act of symbolical and physical triumph. In contrast to Goldziher, he describes the construction of a mosque over a pre-Islamic site of worship as defeating and replacing the preceding cult. In his words, this act is ‘an expression of cultural break rather than continuity, in essence’.15 The historian David Frankfurter, in his insightful introduction to Christianity in late antique Egypt, underscores continuity and integration:

The installation of a holy site, either by apparition or deliberate missionary innovation, the presence of a holy man or miraculous relic, offers indigenous local culture the chance to assimilate new religious ideas into native idiom, existing social networks, and the experience of the natural environment’.16

Put differently, Frankfurter avers – and his thesis very much calls to mind Goldziher’s – that indigenous holy sites and local traditions are preserved by being incorporated into the new religious culture, re-consecrated and even revitalised.17

Frankfurter’s model seems to best explain the fact that sacred places and holy days often enjoyed great longevity in the religious culture of the Middle East. Moreover, medieval Muslim scholars refer to the phenomenon outspokenly, telling of the inclusion of holy sites previously venerated by other creeds into Islam’s sacred topography.18 The challenge of the modern historian and scholar of Islam is to explain this process in each of the different historical settings anew. In order to do so for the case of Mashhad al-Husayn, I have compiled a large corpus of sources that shed light on the history of the shrine. This corpus includes Arabic works of different genres: chronicles, biographical dictionaries, fatwas, travellers’ accounts, geographical treatises, homilies, hagiographical works, religious polemics, inscriptions, artifacts, and
archaeological remains. Close attention to nuances in the narratives presented in those sources may reveal the intricate process of the construction of new meanings over time, or the coexistence of simultaneous different meanings that the place held for its various visitors.  

Part Two is devoted to sanctified stretches of time. It delves into the contested sanctity of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic calendar year, and surveys the development of its rites, once again as ‘thickly’ as possible. Like Part One, it proceeds in a roughly chronological order – from pre-Islamic Arabia, through the formative period of Islam and the early caliphate, the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, and on to the later stages of the Mamluk state. It chronicles the changing expressions of the veneration of the month in religious thought, practice and literature, based on multiple genres and texts: historical, liturgical, prescriptive, polemical and documentary. Here I attempt to decipher the meaning and abiding relevance of the sacred time of Rajab, as well as the continuous opposition to its commemoration.  

In my search for references to Rajab, I returned, as much as possible, to the works of authors who refer to the shrine of al-Husayn and its cult, or at least voice their opinion on sacred places, as well as on sacred times. These include the polymath al-Biruni (d. c. 440/1048), the Imami scholar Ibn Tawus (d. 664/1266), the Sufis al-Ghazzali (d. 555/1111) and al-Jilani (d. 561/1166), the Hanbali jurists Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392–3), the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi (d. 845/1442) and his Isma'ili counterpart, the Yemeni dā‘ī Idris ‘Imad al-Din al-Qurashi (d. 872/1467). Having their perspective on both case-studies may lend greater coherence to the study of the common theme of the construction of sanctity in medieval Islam.  

During the pre-Islamic era, Rajab had constituted one of the four sacred months (al-ashhur al-ªurum) during which the Arabs laid down their arms and engaged in a host of religious devotions. A protracted debate over the permissibility of the continuous veneration of Rajab evolved in the formative period of Islam and has been going on for centuries. Nonetheless, from no later than the tenth century onwards, Sunni and Shi‘i authors have compiled manuals that record and recommend a variety of special personal rites for Rajab. Official public acknowledgement of the special status of the month is indicated in sporadic and extremely laconic references in sources pertaining
to the Umayyad period (especially in Mecca), and then to the Ikhshids (935–968) in Egypt, and the Hamdanids (905–1004) in Northern Syria and the Jazira. Especially in Cairo, public rites of Rajab developed into extravagant festivities under Fatimid (969–1171) and Mamluk (1250–1517) rule.

While political authorities played a significant role in those enterprises, there were also vibrant initiatives ‘from below’. Typically, new rituals assumed the guise of venerable old traditions, yet provoked the recurrent criticism of the ʿulama’. The carnivalesque atmosphere of some of the later festivities certainly defied accepted views of sacred time and incurred fierce opposition, challenging us to try and penetrate the perspectives (in the plural) of the practitioners, rather than adopt that of their censors.

In my Final Comments I hope to demonstrate that juxtaposing the construction of temporal and territorial sanctity indeed enables a fresh look at each category (and especially at the much less researched concept of sacred time in Islam), a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon as a whole, and some new insights into the historical development of the religious culture of Muslims. The concluding discussion will focus on the thematic links between Parts One and Two. It will highlight commonalities between perceptions of and practices at sacred places and times, as well as the effect of their conflation.

A few short Excurses supplement the narrative of each part of the book, digressing from the main plotlines in order to elaborate on a number of themes: the foundation of an Islamic lunar calendar, the concept of istighfār (seeking pardon); the embellishment of shrines and its symbolic meanings; treatises in praise of Ascalon (Faḍāʾil ʿAsqalān) and treatises in praise of Rajab (Faḍāʾil Rajab and Faḍāʾil al-Awqāt, The Merits of Times); Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics against the sanctification of places; Victor Turner’s contribution to the study of medieval pilgrimage; and pilgrimage to Ascalon in late Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine.

A long-term historical investigation of thought on and practice in times and places deemed holy – by putting two controversial case-studies under the microscope and then ‘zooming out’ for a macroscopic perspective, as it were – is an ambitious undertaking. To begin with, the potential database for such a study is dispersed and vast, even if one wishes only to tap into historical, geographical, devotional, legal and theological literature from the Sunni,
Imami and Ismaʿili traditions. Tapping into the theoretical input of more than a hundred years of preoccupation with the sacred in modern academic studies of religion, sociology and anthropology is a likewise daunting task. Encouraged by Peter Burke’s *History and Social Theory* (1992) to make selective and eclectic use of this rich scientific legacy while I was working on my PhD, I consulted the great early theoreticians and a few more recent models, which I found inspiring and of explanatory strength for the interpretation of my medieval historical sources, this time too.

**Notes**

2. ‘And hold fast, all of you together, to God’s rope (*wa-i’taṣimū bi-ḥabl Allāh*) and do not separate. And remember God’s favour unto you’ (Q. 3: 98). Ḥabl Allāh is also one of the names of the Qurʾān (Mir, ‘Names of the Qurʾān’, p. 512b), and a designation for the caliphs or caliphate (see Crone and Hinds, *God’s Caliph*, pp. 39–40. I thank Abigail Krasner Balbale for this reference).
4. For an intellectual biography, see Kohlberg, *Medieval Muslim Scholar*.
9. Mol, ‘*Laylat al-Qadr*’, p. 83; see also Brunschwig’s short piece ‘Le culte et le temps’ on scholarly debates regarding the appropriate times for performing the core Islamic rites, the significance of observing them on a timely basis and the necessary conditions for postponing those religious obligations.
10. Albeit in a very haphazard manner; see Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety*, Appendix I.
17. Ibid. pp. 8, 73. For the term ‘great tradition’, see above, p. 15.
19. See Rodman, ‘Empowering place’.
21. Ibid. p. 49.