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Vicissitudes of a Holy Place: Construction, Destruction and Commemoration of Mashhad Ḥusayn in Ascalon

“Look at the bones, how we revive them and clothe them once more in flesh.” (Q: 2, 259)

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Abstract: This article follows the transmutations of narratives, material structures and rituals focused on Mashhad Ḥusayn. It begins with the alleged discovery of the head of the martyred grandson of the Prophet by the Ismā‘īlī Fāṭimids at the end of the eleventh century in Ascalon, spans the millennium and ends with the recent revival of pilgrimage to the site, dominated by tourists affiliated with the Bohra Dā‘ūdīyya. It is based on medieval and modern historical, ethnographical and geographical accounts, hagiography, epigraphy, archaeology, travelers’ and pilgrims’ itineraries, state and military archives, maps, photographs and oral accounts. The establishment of the shrine in Ascalon, the transferal of the relic to Cairo and the visitation of the site under the Sunni Ayyubids, Mamluks and Ottomans are studied in their political and religious contexts. The final part of the article explores the development of a Palestinian popular celebration (*mawsim*) in the vicinity of the shrine in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the demolition of the shrine by the IDF in 1950 and the establishment of a commemorative prayer dais in 2000 – the result of a joint initiative of the 52nd *dā‘ī muṭlaq* of the Dā‘ūdī Bohras from India and an Israeli entrepreneur of tourism.

Keywords: Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī, shrine (*mashhad*), Fāṭimid, Ismā‘īlī, Bohra Dā‘ūdīyya, Ascalon, Cairo, relic, saint, *mawsim*, Palestine, Israel

Many thousands of Ismā‘īlī Shī‘īs, members of the Bohra Dā‘ūdīyya sect, have traveled since 1980 from India and Pakistan to an obscure pilgrimage site located in the backyard of a hospital in the Israeli town of Ashqelon. The site they venerate – reviving thereby a tradition initiated in the late-eleventh century – was allegedly the temporary burial place of the head of the martyred Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī.

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A large shrine known as Mashhad Ḥusayn had marked the place until its demolition by the Israeli army in 1950, in the aftermath of the War of 1948. The new political situation following Israel's peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 enabled the revival of the pilgrimage and the establishment, in 2000, of a symbolic memorial in the shape of a modest open mosque, constructed of marble.

This article follows the transmutations of narratives, material structures and rituals focused on the site for the past millennium. It is based on medieval and modern historical, ethnographical and geographical accounts, on hagiography, epigraphy, archaeological remains, itineraries of travelers and pilgrims and in state and military archives, as well as in maps, photographs and oral accounts. The erratic history of Mashhad Ḥusayn in Ascalon (Ashqelon in biblical and current Hebrew; 'Asqalān in Arabic) encapsulates important intersections in Middle Eastern history and highlights some of its major schisms. It has engaged Sunnīs and Shī'īs, rulers, pilgrims and scholarly critics, Crusaders and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, generals and tourist entrepreneurs. All this makes it not only an attractive case study of saint veneration, commemoration and obliteration, but also a telling historical plot whose decipherment presents a challenge fit for collaborative research. In the following, the reconstruction of the medieval narratives (with reference to earlier scholarly endeavors) is presented mainly by Daniella TALMON-HELLER; the identification of the archaeological remains and the account of the site's fortunes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is mainly the work of Benjamin Z. KEDAR, while the investigation of the recent revival of pilgrimage to the site has been done mainly by Yitzhak REITER.

The martyrdom of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī and the “via dolorosa” of his severed head

The severed head of Ḥusayn, Muḥammad's grandson and the leader of the anti-Umayyad faction after the murder of his father 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the fourth and last of the “righteous caliphs,” became one of the most poignant symbols of Shī'ī martyrology. The story of the death of Ḥusayn is a key narrative of early Islamic history, and arguably the most crucial event in the formation of Shī'ī memory and identity.¹ According to multiple accounts of medieval Muslim histo-

¹ For a detailed account of the battle/massacre of Karbalā' and the legend of Ḥusayn see Laura VECCIA VAGLIERI, “Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib,” *EP* 3: 610–615; J. CALMARD, “Ḥosayn b. 'Alī in Popular Shī'ism,” *Encyclopedia Iranica* 12: 498–502.

rians, the severely wounded or already dead Ḥusayn was decapitated at Karbalā' (61/680), where 72 of his relatives were massacred.² While his body was brought to burial at the site, his head was carried in the triumphal procession initiated by 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād, the governor of Kūfa. The caravan passed through a number of cities on its way to Damascus, exhibiting also the hapless captives (mainly women) of Karbalā'. The head was accompanied by a pillar of light and performed various wonders along the route.³

In Damascus, the captives and Ḥusayn's head were brought before the Umayyad caliph Yazīd, who, according to most traditions, showed regret for the acts of his governor.⁴ Regarding the further whereabouts of the head, some sources report that it was returned to Karbalā' and buried there with the rest of the body forty days after Ḥusayn's martyrdom, on the 20th of the month of Ṣafar.⁵ According to another version, Yazīd sent it to al-Madīna, where it was buried next to the tomb of Ḥusayn's mother Fāṭima. Najaf, Kūfa and al-Raqqā are also mentioned as possible burial sites of the head.⁶ According to a report attributed to the beautiful and clever nanny (*ḥāḍina*) of Yazīd, Rayyā, the head was kept in Damascus in an arsenal of arms until Yazīd's heir Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik brought it to a proper burial. What had become by then a bare white skull was placed "among the graves of the Muslims (*fī maqābir al-Muslimīn*)."⁷ Two shrines commemorate Ḥusayn in Damascus, both in the very heart of its sacred space: just outside the eastern door of the Umayyad Mosque (the Bāb Jayrūn),

2 Mahmoud AYOUB, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*, The Hague 1978, 108.

3 Max VAN BERCHEM, "La chaire de la Mosquée d'Hébron et le martyron de la tête de Ḥusain à Ascalon," in: *Festschrift Eduard Sachau zum siebzigsten Geburtstage*, ed. Gotthold Weil, Berlin 1915, 298–310, repr. in Max VAN BERCHEM, *Opera Minora*, Genève 1978, 2: 633–645; Khalid SINDAWI, "The Head of Ḥusayn Ibn 'Alī: Its Various Places of Burial and the Miracles that it Performed," in: Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter, Leonard Hammer (eds.), *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-existence*, London and New York: Routledge 2009, 264–273; Stephennie MULDER, *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnīs, Shī'is, and the Architecture of Coexistence*, Edinburgh 2014, 386–388.

4 VAGLIERI, "Ḥusayn," 611–612.

5 Joseph W. MERI, *The Cult of the Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria*, Oxford 2002, 192. Al-Birūnī (d. 440/1048) mentions the visitation of 40 men on that very day, a precedent that apparently was followed in subsequent years: al-Birūnī, *al- Athār al-Bāqīyya 'an al-Qurūn al-Khālīyya*, ed. C. Eduard Sachau, Leipzig 1923, 331; English translation in *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. and ed. C.E. Sachau, London 1879, 328. See also Mahmoud AYOUB, "Arba'in," *Enc. Iranica* 3: 275–276.

6 Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Beirut 1957, 5: 238.

7 Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh Dimashq*, 69: 161.

and at the northeastern corner of the complex.⁸ The location of the shrine inside the mosque, still known today as Mashhad Ḥusayn, coincides, according to the tenth-century geographers al-Iṣṭakhri and Ibn Ḥawqal, with the place where Ḥusayn's head was exhibited in 680, which is also the site of the murder of Yaḥyā b. al-Zakariyā (John the Baptist) centuries earlier.⁹ This is in line with Shī'i traditions (found already in an eighth-century treatise), linking Ḥusayn's martyrdom to the hagiography of John the Baptist.¹⁰ At some point, the place was identified as the location of the relic's *burial*.

Quite a few medieval historians engage in scholarly discussions about the final resting place of the tortured head, or honestly admit that they do not know.¹¹ Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), for example, quotes early sources relating that when the *Musawwida* (the 'Abbāsids) came to Damascus, they inquired about the tomb, desecrated it and took the head out, and "only God knows what happened to it."¹² This ambiguity gave rise to multiple theories about the itinerary and final burial place of the relic, feeding colorful hagiographical anecdotes. The sites which had allegedly absorbed at least a drop of the martyr's blood or had witnessed wonders performed by his severed head¹³ gave rise to its veneration in at least seven different locations: al-Raqqa on the Euphrates, Aleppo and Balis in northern Syria, Najaf in southern Iraq, Marw in Khurāsān, Ascalon in southern Palestine and Cairo. Our investigation concentrates on Ascalon and wanders to Cairo.

⁸ See Jean-Michel MOUTON, "De quelques reliques conservées à Damas au Moyen Âge. Stratégie politique et religiosité populaire sous les Bourides," *Annales Islamiques* 27 (1993): 250.

⁹ Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Ard*, Beirut 1979, 161.

¹⁰ VAN BERCHEM, "La chaire," 304 (repr. 1978, 2: 638); L. H. VINCENT and E. J. H. MACKAY, *Hébron. Le Ḥaram el-Khalīl. Sépulture des Patriarches*, Paris 1923, 226–227. On parallels, see Khalid SINDĀWĪ, "Al-Ḥusain Ibn 'Alī and Yaḥyā Ibn Zakariyyā in the Shī'ite Sources: A Comparative Study," *Islamic Culture* 78 (2004): 37–54.

¹¹ See, for example, Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 8: 222; Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umari, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, Cairo 1924, 1: 220; translated in MERI, *Cult*, 193; and Ibn Taymiyya and Nuwayrī below.

¹² Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, 3: 319.

¹³ See, for example, AYOUB, *Redemptive Suffering*, 132–33; MERI, *Cult*, 192. A prevalent sign of Shī'i veneration of the soil which had been in touch with the blood or body of Ḥusayn is the performance of the *sujūd* (prostration) on a little tablet made from the clay of Karbalā' (known as *turbah*, or *mohr*). For a contemporary explanation of the custom and its origins in Prophetic ḥadīth, see http://www.al-islam.org/nutshell/laws_practices/7.htm (accessed 14.11.2013).

The commemoration of Ḥusayn in Ascalon – the epigraphic and archaeological evidence

An inscription that adorns a wooden *minbar* (pulpit) [Fig. 1] commissioned by the Fāṭimid Muslim Armenian general and vizier Badr al-Jamālī in 484/1091–92, unambiguously connects Ḥusayn's story with Ascalon. Badr al-Jamālī, known also as Amīr al-Juyūsh (d. 487/1094) – savior and reformer of the Fāṭimid caliphate in a period of economic crisis, and military defeats – was then at the height of his career.¹⁴ Eighteen lines (6 lines over the “gate” of the pulpit, and 12 lines on the boards that frame it and on the side banisters) proudly announce, in Kūfic script, the appearance (*izhār*) of “the head of our master (*mawlanā*) the *imām*, the martyr Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib.” The discovery is presented as a wonder (*mu‘jiza*),¹⁵ a sign (*āya*) of heavenly grace for the Imām al-Mustanṣir bi-Allāh¹⁶ and his dynasty, an honor and happiness for his faithful friends and faction of partisans (*shī‘atihi al-mu‘minīn*), and a special favor for “his slave, the illustrious lord, the commander of the armies, the sword of Islam, the succor of the Imām Abū al-Najm Badr al-Mustanṣirī,”¹⁷ the patron of the *minbar*. The inscription invokes heavenly wrath upon the heads of the tyrants (or oppressors – *al-zālimūn*), who hid the sacred relic in order to “obliterate its light.” A list of several assets endowed by Badr al-Jamālī for the benefit of the maintenance, custodians and guards of the *mashhad* he had founded as a renewed burial place for the relic, follows. The inscription goes on to mention the religious practices expected to take place at the martyr: prayer “of those wishing to have their prayers accepted,” the seeking of intercession (*shafā‘a*) and visitation.¹⁸ It ends with an address to all believers, urging them to protect and honor the holy place and take good care of its purity and cleanliness, and with a citation of a favorite

14 Farhad DAFTARY, *The Ismā‘īlis: Their History and Doctrines*, Cambridge 1990, 222; for a detailed account of his career, see Seta B. DADOYAN, *The Fāṭimid Armenians*, Leiden 1997, 107–127.

15 On the “rediscovery” of forgotten holy sites and relics, see MERI, *Cult*, 43–47. For other examples, see Daniella TALMON-HELLER, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria*, Leiden 2007, 190–198.

16 Al-Mustanṣir bi-Allāh, eighth Fāṭimid caliph (427/1036–487/1094).

17 For his full titulary (which was especially tailored for his elevated and unprecedented status) see DADOYAN, *Fāṭimid Armenians*, 119–120; Moshe SHARON, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae* (hereafter: *CIAP*), 1, Leiden, New York, Cologne 1997, 167–177. For a detailed discussion of Qur’ānic, literary and historical allusions, see J.-A. JAUSSEN, “Inscriptions coufiques de la chaire du martyr al-Ḥusayn, à Hébron,” *Revue Biblique* 32 (1923): 579–596.

18 This short list mirrors the great significance holy sites associated with members of Ahl al-Bayt had in the religious life and in the theology of Shī‘īs (see MULDER, *Shrines*, 14–15).

Shī'ī *ḥadīth* known as Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn (the two precious gifts accorded by God to his people: the Qur'ān and Ahl al-Bayt; namely the family of the Prophet).¹⁹

The *minbar* is still extant in the sanctuary of the Patriarchs in Hebron (in Arabic: al-Ḥaram al-Ibrāhīmī, or Ḥaram Sayyidnā al-Khalīl). A slab of marble with fragments of another inscription, carrying the same date (484 A. H.), seems to testify to the actual building of the *mashhad* for which it was intended (referred to in the inscription on the *minbar*, above).²⁰

VINCENT and MACKAY, and more recently DE SMET and WILLIAMS, suggest to take into account the possibility that the Fāṭimid mausoleum may have been established on a hill that was earlier known as the burial place of two beheaded Christian martyrs, victims of the anti-Christian persecutions of the emperor Diocletian (308–311).²¹ Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea (c. 260–339) mentions an interrogation of several Egyptian Christians, who were on their way to Cilicia,

19 The inscriptions have been most recently published by SHARON, *CIAP* 1: 154–159 and (with some minor additions) 5, Leiden, Boston 2013, 28–38. For earlier publications see VAN BERCHEM, “La chaire,” 300–302 (repr. 1978, 2: 635–637); VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 222–225; JAUSSEN, “Inscriptions coufiques,” 575–597. Gaston WIET, “Notes d'épigraphie syro-musulmane,” *Syria* 5 (1924): 217–228; Etienne COMBE, Jean SAUVAGET, Gaston WIET, *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (hereafter *RCEA*) 7: 260–263; Caroline WILLIAMS, “The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fāṭimid Monuments of Cairo. Part I: The Mosque of al-Aqmar,” *Muqarnas* 1(1983): 41–42, “The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fāṭimid Monuments of Cairo. Part II: The Mausolea,” *Muqarnas* 3 (1983): 57. On the ornamentation of the *minbar*, see Yasser TABBAA, “Originality and Innovation in Syrian Woodwork of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” in: *Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Daniella Talmon-Heller and Katia Cytryn-Silverman, Leiden: Brill, 2015.

20 The construction of the *mashhad* is mentioned in Ibn Khallikān's biography of Badr al-Dīn (Ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-A'yān*, ed. I. 'Abbās, Beirut 1969, 2: 450; and by Maqrīzī, who is not sure whether the work was commissioned by Badr al-Jamālī or by his son (Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Athār*, ed. A. F. Sayyid, London 2002, 2: 406). JAUSSEN argues that he had only repaired an existing shrine: JAUSSEN, “Inscriptions coufiques,” 595; SHARON corrected his reading. For Badr al-Dīn's other religious and military building projects, see DADOYAN, *Fāṭimid Armenians*, 126, 144–146 and another inscription from Ascalon dated 486/1093: *RCEA* 8: 2; SHARON, *CIAP* 1: 151. In his cryptic account of an investigation of the space under the Hebron sanctuary, Moshe DAYAN published the photograph of a stone bearing a part of sūra 2: 255 and asserted that it was the third out of five stones on which the verse in its entirety was inscribed. He went on to assert that all five stones originated in an Ascalon mosque; four are now in a Cairo museum while the fifth somehow made its way to the Hebron sanctuary: Moshe DAYAN, “The Cave of Machpelah – The Cave beneath the Mosque,” *Qadmoniot* 36 (1976), 129–131 [in Hebrew]. DAYAN did not indicate the grounds for these assertions. See also SHARON, *CIAP* 5: 25–28.

21 VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 237–238; Daniel DE SMET, “La translation du Ra's al-Ḥusayn au Caire faṭimide,” in: *Egypt and Syria in the Fāṭimid, Ayyūbid and Mamlūk Eras II*, ed. Urban Vermuelen and Daniel De Smet, Leuven 1998, 38; WILLIAMS, “The Cult. Part One,” 41.



Fig. 1: The Ascalon *minbar* in the Hebron sanctuary (photo: B. Z. Kedar)

“before the gates of Ascalon,” and their trial by the local governor. According to his *Martyrs of Palestine*, some of the confessors were sentenced to torture and others to death; “Primus and Elias were beheaded by the sword.”²² Eusebius fails to indicate their place of burial, but the mosaic map of Madaba (late-sixth to early-seventh century) shows “The [place] of the Egy[p]tians” outside the north-eastern corner of Ascalon’s wall.²³ The Christian pilgrim Antoninus (or: the Anonymous) of Piacenza, who visited Ascalon on his way from Jerusalem to Gaza and the Sinai around 570, writes that “it is the resting place of the three brothers who were Egyptian martyrs. Each of them had a name of his own, but they are usually called ‘The Egyptians.’”²⁴

There are no references to visits to the Church of the Egyptian martyrs by Christian pilgrims later than the pilgrim of Piacenza. Yet we may conjecture that at some point the Muslims appropriated the already sacred site and Islamized its beheaded martyr(s). Was it Badr al-Dīn al-Jamālī in the late-eleventh century or was he merely reviving an older Muslim tradition, going back to the Umayyad period?²⁵

The commemoration of Ḥusayn in Ascalon – textual *lacunae* and communications

If one may argue *e silentio*, the absence of any notice of a shrine in honor of Ḥusayn from the numerous *faḍā’il* traditions that celebrate the virtues of Ascalon amounts to a strong argument against the existence of an early association between the martyr and the city. This Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsīd sub-genre of *ḥadīth* propagates the sanctity of the cities of the maritime frontier zone between

²² *History of the Martyrs in Palestine* by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, ed. and trans. W. Cureton, Paris (1861) 1961, 34.

²³ VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 237–240; for Ascalon on the Madaba map see most recently E. ALLIATA, “The Legends of the Madaba Map,” in: *The Madaba Map Centenary, 1897–1997. Travelling through the Byzantine Umayyad Period. Proceedings of the International Conference held in Amman, 7–9 April 1997*, ed. Michele Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata, Jerusalem 1999, 86.

²⁴ Translated in: John WILKINSON, “The Piacenza Pilgrim. Travels from Piacenza,” in: *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Warminster 1977, 85.

²⁵ A late-19th century work entitled *Nūr al-Abṣār fī Manāqib Ahl Bayt al-Nabī al-Mukhtār* by the Egyptian Sayyid Ḥasan b. MU’MIN SHABLANJĪ (Bombay 1983) claims that the head was buried in Ascalon already in Yazīd’s time, suggesting that the caliph, who wanted to rid himself of this potentially dangerous relic, ordered to dispose of it “somewhere.” No references to medieval sources, however, are provided.

the Muslims and the Byzantines (called *al-thughūr al-baḥriyya*), from al-ʿArish to upper Syria. It promises heavenly rewards to those who settle them and partake in their defense.²⁶ Ascalon often receives the honorary title *ʿArūs al-Shām* – the bride of Syria, or *iḥdā al-ʿarūsayn* – one of the two brides (the other being Gaza). A group of traditions quotes the Prophet making special reference to a cemetery (*maqbara*) in Ascalon and to Muslim martyrs buried there,²⁷ but none refers to the head of “the prince of martyrs,” Ḥusayn.²⁸ Likewise, Muqaddasī’s short yet enthusiastic description of the “excellent and well-fortified,” thriving city of Ascalon, apparently written after his visit there between 985 and 990, makes no reference to a shrine for Ḥusayn.²⁹ He does mention a mosque in the market of the cloth merchants. All that Nāṣir-i Khusraw, the Ismāʿīlī Persian who visited the city in 1047 on his way to Egypt, notes that in Ascalon is a fine bazaar, a Friday mosque and a huge stone arch that must have once been, so he thought, part of another mosque.³⁰

The earliest historian who mentions Ascalon as the possible burial place of the head of Ḥusayn, and who postdates the artisan who communicated the news of its discovery via the 484 AH inscription, seems to be Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Ibn al-ʿImrānī (d. c. 580/1185), author of a chronicle of the ʿAbbāsīd dynasty.³¹ In a short summary of the Umayyad period, offered at the beginning of the book, Ibn al-ʿImrānī relates the story of the aftermath of Karbalāʾ, using a style deemed by the editor of the modern edition, Qasim al-Samarrai, as “folkloristic”.³² According to al-ʿImrānī’s account, Yazīd’s reaction to the sight of the head was that of remorse and anguish: he ordered to wash it carefully in rose water and wrap it in delicate shrouds. A group of people from Ascalon, who happened to be present, asked the caliph’s permission to bury the head in their home town, and their wish was granted. Ibn al-ʿImrānī comments that the shrine they had built in honor of the head became known as Mashhad al-Ra’s, “and it draws visitors from all over until the present day.”³³

26 Sulayman BASHEAR, “Apocalyptic and Other Materials on Early Muslim-Byzantine Wars: A Review of Arabic Sources,” *JRAS* third series 1(1991): 193–198.

27 BASHEAR, “Apocalyptic,” 197–198.

28 Amikam ELAD, “The Coastal Cities of Palestine During the Early Middle Ages,” *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 2 (1982): 151–152.

29 Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taḳāsim*, Leiden 1906, 174; trans. in COLLINS, *Best Divisions*, 158.

30 *Naser-e Khosraw’s Book of Travels (Safarnāma)*, trans. W. M. Thackston Jr., Albany N. Y. 1986, 38.

31 Mentioned by Shukrī ʿARRĀF, *Ṭabaqāt al-Anbiyāʾ wa-l-Awliyāʾ fī al-Arḍ al-Muqaddasa*, Tarshiha 1994, 2: 267–269.

32 Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *al-Inbāʾ fī Taʾrikh al-Khulafāʾ*, ed. Q. al-Samarrai, Leiden 1973, 9.

33 Ibn al-ʿImrānī, *Inbāʾ*, 54.

The Egyptian historian Ibn Muyassar (d. 677/1278) also seems to be referring to an earlier, hardly recognizable (*makān dāris*) shrine, from which the head was transferred to the abode constructed for it in the late-eleventh century. According to this account, it was al-Afḍal Shāhanshāh (d. 515/1121) the son of Badr al-Jamālī and chief commander of the Fāṭimid army³⁴ who visited Ascalon and saw to the reburial of the sacred relic. The later historian al-Maqrīzī repeats this story almost verbatim, adding that perhaps al-Afḍal had only finished off a building project initiated by his father.³⁵ More importantly, Maqrīzī also preserves an account about the embellishment of the shrine some three decades after its construction. Under the year 516/1122 he reports that the Fāṭimid vizier al-Ma'mūn ordered a chandelier of gold and a chandelier of silver to be especially manufactured for each of the shrines in honor of Ḥusayn, and be sent to Karbalā' and to Ascalon.³⁶

Interpretations of the historical context

Whether based on an earlier Christian or Muslim tradition, or an original “invented tradition” of Badr al-Jamālī, the erection of a shrine and the establishment of a pilgrimage in late-eleventh-century Ascalon beg for an explanation rooted in historical context. Modern scholarship seeks the answers either in the political circumstances of the contemporaneous Middle East, or in the religious climate of the time, or in the interplay between the two. Mashhad Ra's Ḥusayn has been viewed as the personal project of Badr al-Dīn al-Jamālī, orchestrated to strengthen his already powerful position in the Fāṭimid state.³⁷ Alternatively, it has been suggested that the shrine was established to serve the cause of the Fāṭimid dynasty, and secure its grip on one of its last strongholds in Syria (most of it was lost to the Seljūqs by then) by bolstering the religious prestige of the city of Ascalon.³⁸ A number of scholars emphasize the ecumenical appeal of the figure of Imām Ḥusayn, who was also the grandson of the Prophet, de-emphasiz-

34 On al-Afḍal, see DADOYAN, *Fatimid Armenians*, 127–139.

35 Ibn al-Muyassar, *Akhbār Miṣr*, ed. Henri Massé, Cairo 1919, 38; Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Ḥunafā'*, ed. M. H. M. Ahmad, Cairo c1973, 3: 22.

36 Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz*, 3: 85.

37 VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hebron*, 240; Moshe GIL, *A History of Palestine 634–1099*, trans. Esther Broido, Cambridge 1992, 194; DE SMET, “Translation,” 38.

38 DAFTARY, *The Ismā'īlīs*, 185, 207. On the veneration of Ḥusayn in pre-Fāṭimid and Fāṭimid Egypt, especially on the day of 'Āshūrā' institutionalized as an official holiday probably since 515/1121 or 517/1223, see Daniel DE SMET, “Les fêtes chiites en Égypte fatimide,” *Acta Orientalia Belgica* 10 (1995–1996): 190–193.

ing any specifically Ismā'īlī content of his cult.³⁹ DADOYAN presents Badr al-Dīn's religious policy as maneuvering between the reinforcement of some Shī'ī-Ismā'īlī peculiarities and the neglect of others, and between measures that appeal to the Shī'ī community to those that were intended to please the Sunni majority.⁴⁰

Looking primarily at the religious climate of the late-eleventh century, and allowing a lesser role to dynastic politics and personal power struggles, several recently published works speak of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries as a time of *emplacement* of Islamic sacred history in the Middle East, namely of marking the landscape with noticeable Muslim graves and shrines, especially of the Companions of the Prophet. Sites devoted to 'Alids who were revered by all Muslims, Sunnis as well as Shī'īs, were especially popular with patrons and pilgrims.⁴¹

A close look at the text of the inscription on Badr al-Dīn's *minbar* reveals that, on the whole, Mashhad Ra's Ḥusayn falls into this latter category. At the outset it divides the world into cursed oppressors (*al-ẓālimūn la' anahum Allāh*) and blessed believers. The latter are designated, in a twice-repeated phrase, as the loyal friends of God (*awliyā'ihī al-mayāmīn*), the faction of his faithful partisans (*shī'a-tihī al-mu'minīn bihī*). The detailed (albeit conventional) praise for the Fāṭimid *imāms*, past, present and future, and the quotation of Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn also underline the Shī'ī affiliation of the project. Yet, Badr al-Dīn announces that he had buried the head in a most noble place "for the prayer of those wishing to have their prayers accepted, and an intercessor for those who seek his (its) mediation, and for the visitors."⁴² Those may well be both Sunnis and Shī'īs indiscriminately.

Transferal of the head to Cairo

In the summer of 548/1153, the Muslim defenders of Ascalon, the last Fāṭimid stronghold on the Palestinian littoral, surrendered after seven months of Frank-

³⁹ See, for example, Paula SANDERS, "Rise of Ḥāfiẓī Historiography in Late Fāṭimid Egypt," *Studia Islamica* 75 (1992): 100–101.

⁴⁰ DADOYAN, *Fatimid Armenians*, 121–123.

⁴¹ Aliaa EL-SANDOUBY, "The Places of Ahl al-Bayt in Bilād al-Shām: The Making of a 'Shrine'," *ARAM* 19 (2007): 685; Daniella TALMON-HELLER, "Graves, Relics and Sanctuaries: the Evolution of Syrian Sacred Topography," *ARAM* 19 (2007): 601–620; MULDER, *Shrines*, 390–398; Cyrille JALABERT, "Comment Damas est devenue une métropole islamique," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 53–4 (2001–2): 13–42. Williams recognizes here the beginning of an officially sponsored cult of 'Alid martyrs and saints, which culminated in 1154 (see below): WILLIAMS, "The Cult. Part Two,"³⁹.

⁴² SHARON, *CIAP* 1:155–158.

ish siege. King Baldwin III allowed the population to leave. The head of Ḥusayn was removed from its mausoleum and taken to a safe haven in Cairo. According to Ibn al-Azraq al-Fāriqī (d. 1164–1165 or 1176–1177), author of *Ta'rikh Mayyāfāriqin wa-Āmid*, the governor and *qaḍī* of Ascalon, acting upon the order of the caliph al-Ẓāfir (r. 544/1149–549/1154), was responsible for the transferal, but details vary in other versions of the story.⁴³ In Cairo, the vizier al-Ṣāliḥ ibn Ṭalā'i' b. al-Ruzzīk initiated the construction of a mosque outside Bāb al-Zuwayla (the southern gate of the walled city), intended as the burial site of the relic and as his own mausoleum.⁴⁴ But he was preceded by members of the entourage of the child caliph al-Fā'iz (r. 549/1154–555/1160). They had built a shrine at Bāb Daylam, within the confines of the palace, parallel to the mausoleum of the Fāṭimid caliphs, into which the head was finally delivered.⁴⁵ In line with typical translation stories, those pertaining to the wandering of the relic in question included, its exhumation and transferal were associated with wonders.⁴⁶

Paula SANDERS and Caroline WILLIAMS tie the establishment of the shrine of Ra's Ḥusayn in Cairo with a coup in the Fāṭimid court, and the need of the new child caliph (or of his advisers) – or, more generally, of the Ismā'īlī imam-caliph – to bolster his legitimacy by strengthening his connections with Ahl al-Bayt and with the remote 'Alīd past.⁴⁷ DE SMET points out that the cult of 'Alīd shrines was nurtured not by the caliphs themselves, but rather by their viziers, whose adherence to Ismā'īlī Shī'a was weak. Hence, rather than being a measure taken to promote the position of the caliphate, it reflects the downfall of the old Fāṭimid elite.⁴⁸

Notwithstanding the particular circumstances of the foundation of the cult of Ra's Ḥusayn in Cairo, it did not die out with the fall of the Fāṭimid regime and the return of Sunnī hegemony to Egypt in the 1170s. On the contrary, the shrine of the head continued to be extremely popular.

Ibn Jubayr, who visited the place in 578/1182, was entirely taken by its beauty and by the piety of its visitors. He applauds the *mashhad* as superb “beyond description,” yet goes on to describe it as a great, richly decorated shrine, built above the silver casket that holds the head. The pilgrims crowd around the tomb, kiss

⁴³ DE SMET, “Translation,” 37–41.

⁴⁴ DADOYAN, *Fatimid Armenians*, 172.

⁴⁵ SANDERS, “Ḥāfiẓī Historiography,” 100.

⁴⁶ Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā*, ed. Muḥammad H. Shams al-Dīn, Beirut 1987, 3: 395–396; Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2: 408–410; Sindāwī, “Head,” 269, n. 41.

⁴⁷ SANDERS, “Ḥāfiẓī Historiography,” 101; Williams, “The Cult. Part Two,” 52–57.

⁴⁸ DE SMET, “La translation,” 35–36.

it, encircle it, touch its cloth cover, cry, pray fervently, “offering up humble supplications that would melt the heart and split the hardest flint.” Ibn Jubayr joins in, wishing to be included among those who benefit from the blessings of the shrine.⁴⁹ While he seems to be an authentic informant regarding the ritual practice at the holy site, his observations regarding its history are dubious: for all he knows, the head was transferred to Cairo directly from Damascus. He does not mention a stopover in Ascalon.⁵⁰

The continuous veneration of the shrine under the Sunnī rulers that followed – Ayyūbid, Mamlūk and Ottoman – corresponds with the findings of Stephennie MULDER, who surveyed some forty medieval shrines in Syria, Egypt, Turkey and Lebanon. She found that nearly all of those shrines were venerated by both Shīʿis and Sunnīs, and most shrines had, at some point between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, benefited from the patronage of Sunnīs, commoners as well as rulers.⁵¹ The Cairene shrine in honor of the martyred Ḥusayn remains one of the holiest Islamic sites of the city, one of two (together with Sayyida Zaynab) that continue to draw pilgrims from all over Egypt. It is known as Jāmiʿ Sayyidnā (Sīdnā, in colloquial) Ḥusayn, or Masjid al-Imām Ḥusayn.⁵²

Ascalon, twelfth to eighteenth centuries

The empty *mashhad* in Ascalon, apparently unharmed by the Franks after all,⁵³ continued to draw visitors despite the absence of its relic. Al-Harawī, author of the first pilgrims’ guide to holy Islamic sites, visited the place in 570/1174. He portrays the frontier town of Ascalon as renowned for Abraham’s well, a strong fort and a shrine for the head of Ḥusayn, which the Muslims delivered to Cairo in 549/1154.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, Leiden 1907, 45; trans. Ronald J. C. Broadhurst, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr*, London 1952, 36–37.

⁵⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, 269; trans. Broadhurst, *Travels*, 280.

⁵¹ MULDER, *Shrines*, 13, 16. For a discussion, see *ibid.*, 152–153, and TALMON-HELLER, *Islamic Piety*, 196–198.

⁵² For descriptions of its veneration in the 19th, early-20th and early-21st century, see Edward W. LANE, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, The Hague, London 1978 [1836], reprint 1989, 215–218; Najīb MAḤFŪẓ, *Bayna al-Qaṣrayn*, Cairo 1956, 192–193; English translation: *Palace Walk*, trans. William M. Hatchins and Olive E. Kenny, Cairo 1989, 168–169; Samuli SCHIELKE, *The Perils of Joy, Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt*, New York 2012, 22, 28, 181.

⁵³ See discussion with comparison to other sites in VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 243–245.

⁵⁴ Joseph W. MERI, *A Lonely Wayfarer’s Guide to Pilgrimage*, ‘Āli ibn Abi Bakr al-Harawī’s *Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt*, text and translation, Princeton 2004, 82–83.

In 587/1191, Saladin ensured that no harm would come to the decorated *minbar* of Mashhad Ra's Ḥusayn. Having decided to leave the city of Ascalon in ruins rather than to risk being cut off from Egypt if it were conquered by Richard the Lionheart and his crusaders, he sent the *minbar* to the sanctuary of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which since 1187 had been securely Muslim.⁵⁵ Saladin's precaution was well taken. Ascalon went through four consecutive destructions: in 587/1191 at Saladin's own order; in 1192 by Richard the Lionheart (who was committed by the Jaffa–Tel 'Ajūl treaty to tearing down whatever had been repaired in Ascalon); in 1247 its recently completed Frankish fortifications were dismantled by the Ayyūbid sultan al-Ṣaliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb, and in 668/1270 Baybars demolished what was left, and filled the city's anchorage (it never had a proper port) with rubble.⁵⁶

The geographical dictionary of Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283) speaks of the Ascalon *mashhad* – “a large shrine with marble columns” – as if intact, with people from all over coming to seek the *baraka* of the tombstone and make vows, though it does mention the destruction of the city in 587/1191.⁵⁷ Qazwīnī's contemporary, the Maghribī traveler Muḥammad al-'Abdarī, who spent several days in Palestine in 689/1290, laments the degree of the destruction of Ascalon at some length. Yet he mentions Mazār Ra's Ḥusayn as a great tall mosque with a big cistern, in which he and his party prayed the noon prayer upon their arrival to Ascalon. He informs his reader (referring him to the report of his visit to Egypt, elsewhere in the book) that the shrine was built “by one of the Banū 'Ubayd” (Fāṭimids), who had ordered that his name be inscribed above the entrance.⁵⁸ In passing, he adds that he and his companions left the place before dark “as staying there is risky, and there is succor in God Almighty alone.” The identical impressions of the better known Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368–9 or 779/1377), omitting the notes regarding the times of arrival and departure and the prayer, are undoubtedly copied from al-'Abdarī's travelogue, as shown by Amikam ELAD.⁵⁹

Ibn Taymiyya found it necessary to refute the sanctity of the shrine in two treatises. In his *al-Qā'ida fī Ziyārat Bayt al-Maqdis* (The Foundation of the Vis-

55 Mujir al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī, *al-Uns al-Jalīl fī Ta'rikh al-Quds wa-l-Khalīl*, Amman 1973, 1: 60–61.

56 Amalia LEVANOI, “‘Asqālān,” *EP*; SHARON, *CIAP* 1:141.

57 Zakariyā al-Qazwīnī, *Athār al-Bilād wa-Akhbār al-'Ubbād*, Beirut 1960, 222

58 Al-'Abdarī, *Rihla*, 231–232. The adjacent Mosque of 'Umar is described as having been demolished, with only some of the walls and marble pillars still standing.

59 *Rihlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, ed. T. Harb, Beirut 1992, 80. For reservations regarding Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's credibility in general, specific doubts regarding the veracity of his arrival in Ascalon (traveling speedily along the unlikely route connecting Gaza–Hebron–Ḥalḥūl–Bethlehem–Jerusalem–Ascalon), and a comparison of the two texts, see Amikam ELAD, “The Description of the Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in Palestine: Is It Original?” *JRAS* 1987, 256–272.

itation of the Holy Land), most likely published in 716/1316,⁶⁰ he writes: “Travel to Ascalon these days is not prescribed by the *sharīʿa*, neither as a religious duty (*wājib*), nor as a commendable act (*mustahabb*). There was merit in settlement in Ascalon, or travel to it, when it was one of the frontier towns of the Muslims (*thughūr*), and the *murābiṭūn fī sabīl Allāh* (the pious defenders of the fortifications) occupied it,⁶¹ but a deserted place like Ascalon, with no houses left in it, can no longer be considered a frontier town, and there is no merit in travel to it.”⁶² Regarding the authenticity of the shrine, Ibn Taymiyya is unequivocal, asserting that it is well known, and no scholar with integrity can claim otherwise, that the *mashhad* in Ascalon appeared out of the blue, after 490/1097, more than 430 (*hijrī*) years after the death of Ḥusayn. He stresses that prior to that, there was nothing – neither an inscription or stone, nor pilgrimage – to indicate any presence of Ḥusaynī relics in Ascalon. Moreover, according to some informants it was the grave of a Christian, one of the followers of Jesus. To further ridicule the veneration of the head of Ḥusayn, Ibn Taymiyya quotes “some Christians,” who, rejoicing at the foolishness of ignorant Muslims, make a comparison between the Christian pair “al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ wa-l-Sayyida Maryam” and the Muslim pair “al-Sayyid Ḥusayn wa-l-Sayyida Nafisa,” suggesting that the head was, most likely, that of a Christian!⁶³

Ibn Taymiyya’s treatise did not stop the visitation of Ascalon. The town remained in ruins but continued to draw travelers. In his *History of Jerusalem and Hebron*, Mujīr al-Dīn (d. 845/1522) states that it had not been rebuilt since its demolition by Saladin. He also notes that it has pilgrimage sites, mentioning specifically a large shrine “built by one of the Fāṭimid caliphs of Egypt, on a site which they had claimed was the place of the head of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī.”⁶⁴

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, more precisely on Muḥarram 1105/October 1693, the polymath, *muftī* and Naqshabandī Ṣūfī ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī (d. 1143/1731) visited the place. It was his second tour of Palestine, and he had already stopped at Jerusalem, Ramla, Lydda, and Jaffa in quest of tombs of prophets, companions of the Prophet and holy men (*awliyāʾ*). He stopped in

⁶⁰ Niels Henrik OLESEN, *Culte des saints et pèlerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya*, Paris 1991, 16.

⁶¹ See n. 11 above.

⁶² Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Qāʿida fī Ziyārat Bayt al-Maqdis*, in Charles D. MATTHEWS, “A Muslim Iconoclast on Jerusalem and Palestine,” *JAOS* 56 (1936): 15.

⁶³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Raʾs al-Ḥusayn*, ed. Muḥammad H. al-Fiqqī, Cairo 1949, 2–10. Nafisa bint Ḥasan b. Zayd (d. 825) was ‘Alī’s great-granddaughter. Her mausoleum in Cairo was a popular pilgrimage site (WILLIAMS, “The Cult. Part Two,” 40, 57, 67–68).

⁶⁴ Mujīr al-Dīn, *al-Uns*, 1: 380, 2: 74. The *minbar* and its history are mentioned in his long description of the sanctuary of the Patriarchs in Hebron (*idem*, 1: 60–61).

Ascalon, in a small company, on his way to Gaza. He reports to have seen a handsome dome, and remarks that supposedly the heads of Ḥasan(!) and Ḥusayn are buried beneath it,⁶⁵ but he regards the claim as “unsubstantiated.” Still, he reports to have recited the Fātiḥa there and to have offered supplications to God. He goes on to mention the well-known, excellent and awe-inspiring Ḥusaynī *mashhad* of his hometown Damascus, which is sought after by many visitors; and that of Cairo. He conjectures that those multiple *mashāhid* were erected upon places in which the head was laid when it was brought from Iraq, but it is not known where it was actually buried.⁶⁶

The Shrine in the Late Ottoman and British Mandate Periods

Where exactly was the *mashhad* visited by al-Nābulṣī located? The map Pierre JACOTIN prepared during Napoleon Bonaparte’s Palestinian campaign in 1799 shows, east of Ascalon’s ruins, a hill crowned by a “tour ruinée qui se voit de loin.”⁶⁷ In 1863 Victor GUÉRIN saw there, on a sandy hill, the ruins of a small mosque called *Mesdjid el-Ḥassan*, from which all of Ascalon was visible.⁶⁸ In 1875 Claude R. CONDER and Herbert H. KITCHENER described the *Mesh-hed Sīdna el Ḥusein* as “a ruined tower of small masonry, apparently an outwork of Ascalon. Part only is standing, and parts of the foundations are covered with sand.”⁶⁹ On their map of 1880 the site overlooks from the east Ascalon’s ruined walls.⁷⁰ On the map prepared during the British Mandate, *Nabī Ḥusain* – marked as a shaykh’s tomb – figures on the same spot.⁷¹ According to the Palestinian historian Muṣṭafā

⁶⁵ Another possible hint to the decapitated Christian martyrs mentioned above.

⁶⁶ ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī, *al-Ḥaḳīqa wa-l-majāz fī riḥlat bilād al-Shām wa-l-Miṣr wa-l-Ḥijāz*, ed. Riyāḍ ‘A. Murād, Damascus 1989, 16 (editor’s preface), 163–164; 428–429.

⁶⁷ Pierre JACOTIN, *Carte topographique de l’Egypte et de plusieurs parties des pays limitrophes*, Paris 1818, Sheet 43.

⁶⁸ Victor GUÉRIN, *Description géographique, historique et archéologique de la Palestine. Description de la Judée*, Paris 1869, 2:142.

⁶⁹ Claude Reignier CONDER and Herbert Horatio KITCHENER, *The Survey of Western Palestine. Memoirs of the Topography, Orography, Hydrography, and Archaeology*, Vol. III, *Judaea*, London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1883, 3:252.

⁷⁰ The Palestine Exploration Fund map is accessible at amudanan.co.il or nla.gov.au/nla.map-rm1949.

⁷¹ Palestine, 1:100,000, Sheet 11: Gaza, revised 1941–42. The site’s coordinates are 1083.1188. See also SHARON, *CIAP* 1:142.

Murād AL-DABBĀGH, writing in 1936, the building encountered by the British was constructed by Raʿūf Pāsha, the Ottoman governor of the district of Jerusalem in the years 1876–1888. The residents of Gaza and of nearby villages such as Ḥamāma, al-Jūra and Naʿaliyya donated money and supplied materials and workers for the building project; in addition, *waqf* properties – shops in Majdal, three km northeast of the *mashhad* – were bestowed. The building included two floors: in the upper one, there were two rooms and a large hall, while in the lower one, where the tomb was located, there were six rooms and two arcades for prayer. Next to the building there was a place for slaughtering and cooking the sacrificial animals.⁷² AL-DABBĀGH does not specify whether the ruins mentioned by JACOTIN, GUÉRIN, CONDER and KITCHENER were incorporated into the rebuilt *mashhad*. At any rate, this *mashhad* existed there until 1950.

But was it located there from the eleventh century onward? Father Louis-Hugues VINCENT, the noted Dominican archaeologist, and Captain Ernest J. H. MACKAY, the first chief inspector of antiquities in British Palestine, who in 1923 dealt with this issue at some length, did not think so. They described the *maqām* or *masdjed el-Ḥusein* as a “characterless, periodically whitewashed building” whose guards had not allowed them to examine whether it contained ancient components. They concluded that the shrine, though attracting many pilgrims and serving the focus for an annual festival, was nothing but a degraded vestige of the original sanctuary, which, they claimed, had been situated inside the walls of Ascalon. The two scholars based their view on the account of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, according to whom the ruins of the grandiose, lofty mosque of Ascalon, known as the mosque of ʿUmar, were situated south of the famous *mashhad* in which the head of Ḥusayn had been kept before its transferal to Cairo. VINCENT and MACKAY interpreted this passage to mean that the *mashhad* was situated “right next” (*tout à côté*) of, or “directly contiguous” (*immédiatement contigu*) to, the mosque of ʿUmar, whose vestiges were dug up just east of Ascalon’s center by Lady Hester Stanhope’s expedition of 1815, and which had stood above the ruins of the Roman public complex excavated in the early 1920s.⁷³ However, it should

⁷² AL-DABBĀGH, *Bilādunā Filasṭīn*, 1/2: 180–183.

⁷³ VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 229–235. For mentions of the mosque in the accounts of the excavations of 1815 and of 1920–1922 see Charles MERYON, *Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope*, London 1846, 3:157, 167–168; John GARSTANG, “The Excavations at Askalon,” *Palestine Exploration Fund. Quarterly Statement* 55 (1923):115–116; idem, “Askalon,” *Palestine Exploration Fund. Quarterly Statement* 56 (1924):33. It may be noted that in 1915 Max VAN BERCHEM argued that the *maqām* should be identified with the Weli el-ḥadra (i.e. *maqām al-khiḍr*) in the western part of Ascalon: “La chaire,” 309, n. 5 (repr. 1978, 2:644, n. 5).

be noted that Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (or rather, al-ʿAbdarī, whose text he copied⁷⁴) did not spell out that the two buildings were *contiguous* to each other: he just wrote that the mosque of ʿUmar was *to the south* of the mosque where Ḥusayn's head had reposed. He went on to say that *to the south* of the mosque of ʿUmar was the Well of Abraham⁷⁵ – and the distance between that mosque and the well amounts to about 240 metres.⁷⁶ We may assume therefore that the *mashhad* of Ḥusayn's head and the mosque of ʿUmar were likewise distant one from another, with the first located outside the city's walls, in ruins since the days of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart.

VINCENT and MACKAY did not put forth a hypothesis that would explain why and when the *mashhad* of Ḥusayn was purportedly moved from inside the ruined city to the hill to its east. Indeed, their lengthy discussion contains elements that militate against such a move. As we have already seen, they wrote that the cult of the decapitated Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī at Ascalon may have amounted to a derivation of the Christian cult of the three Egyptian martyrs, two of whom were decapitated, and noted that the location of “The [place] of the Egy[p]tians” on the Madaba map corresponds to that of the modern mosque of Ḥusayn; moreover, they pointed out that the dual form Masdjed el-Ḥasanein, by which local peasants referred to the shrine, may recall the two decapitated Egyptian martyrs.⁷⁷ If so, the *mashhad* was situated right from the beginning at the location at which the modern maps place it, for it is implausible that a Christian tradition of Byzantine times was still remembered in uninhabited Ascalon at some unknown date after the mid-fourteenth century, when – according to the two scholars' assumption – the *mashhad* was relocated beyond the ruined walls. Yet only an excavation of the *mashhad*'s foundations, probably still extant, may provide a definite date of the shrine's original construction.

Possibly it was the disparaging attitude of VINCENT and MACKAY toward the “construction sans caractère” that caused the Department of Antiquities of British Palestine to abstain from preparing a plan of the shrine. The “Mashhad Sidna el Husein” appears in the department's list of historical sites as containing a ruined tower and two vaulted tombs.⁷⁸ The list does not spell out how this ruined tower – evidently the one recorded by JACOTIN in 1799 and by CONDER

⁷⁴ See n. 59 above.

⁷⁵ *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, A.D. 1325–1354*, trans. H. A.R. Gibb, Cambridge 1958, 1:81.

⁷⁶ See the plan of Ascalon in GARSTANG, “The Excavations at Askalon,” Plate I opposite p. 112.

⁷⁷ VINCENT and MACKAY, *Hébron*, 237–239, esp. 238 n. 1; see also 230, n. 1.

⁷⁸ “Schedule of Historical Monuments and Sites,” *Supplement No. 2 to the Palestine Gazette Extraordinary No. 1375 of 24th November, 1944* (Jerusalem, 1944), 1264, 1287.



Fig. 2: The *mashhad* in 1943, from the northeast. Source: Library of Congress, Matson (Eric G. and Edith) Photograph Collection, LC-DIG-matpc-21687.

and KITCHENER in 1875 – related to the *mashhad*, which – according to AL-DAB-BĀGH – was constructed in 1878. The tower’s remnants may have been incorporated into it, but as no plans of the tower or of the *mashhad* were ever prepared, this must remain a conjecture. If we wish to visualize the *mashhad* in its latest phase we must have recourse to the description of the Palestinian physician and ethnographer Tewfik CANAAN, writing in 1927. CANAAN observed that “Seyidnâ el-Ḥusên S.E of ed-Djorah (near Ascalon) has no tomb, but inside the *maqâm* a fragment of a pillar shows the place where the head of el-Ḥusên was buried. The top of the pillar bears a green *laffeh* [turban] and below it there is a red cloth.” In a footnote he adds: “The large *maqâm* is on top of a hill about 20–30 minutes from the sea. There are no tombs or caves in the neighborhood. Two mulberry trees and a vineyard are his property.”⁷⁹

Richer images may be retrieved from twenty-two photographs taken by photographers of Jerusalem’s American Colony on 21 April 1943 [e.g. Fig. 2] and from

⁷⁹ Tewfik CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London 1927; repr. Jerusalem 1980), 151.



Fig. 3: An aerial view of the *mashhad*, 27 October 1949. Source: Survey of Israel, Leef Collection, P 47–5810

the aerial photo taken by an Israeli–Dutch crew on 1949 [Fig. 3].⁸⁰ These photos, as well as an undated draft showing the shrine’s ruins and the earliest buildings of what was to become Ascalon’s Barzilai Medical Center,⁸¹ have allowed for the preparation of our plan [Fig. 4].⁸²

80 On the work of this crew see Benjamin Z. KEDAR, *The Changing Land between the Jordan and the Sea: Aerial Photographs from 1917 to the Present*, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv 1999), 40, 207 n. 32.

81 Israel Antiquities Authority Archives [hereafter: IAA Archives], Israel Scientific Inspection Files (hereafter: ISIF), P/Ascalon/91/4/X – Nabī Ḥusain (al-Mashhad Sīdnā Ḥusain). The draft’s scale is 1:2,500.

82 Our thanks to Tammy and Reuven Soffer for having prepared the plan.

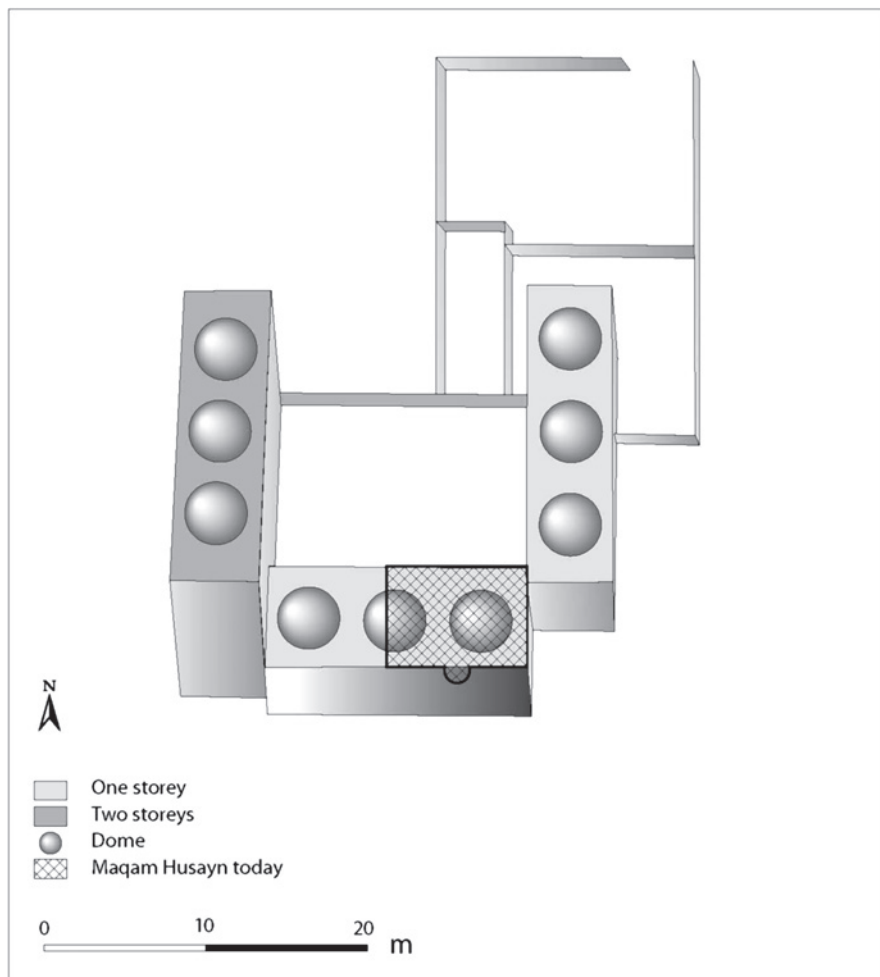


Fig. 4: Plan of the erstwhile *mashhad* and of the present-day prayer platform

The site in Palestinian lore

The photos, now deposited in the Library of Congress, allow us to observe in some detail also the festival that took place on Tuesday and Wednesday, 20–21 April 1943. We see the crowds gathering on Tuesday at Wādī al-Naml on the beach, with some celebrants erecting makeshift tents, and others preparing camels, horses and donkeys to be bathed and healed in the sea, and then we see the animals

in the water. Photos taken on the following day show the flag-bearing procession leaving Majdal and then en route to the *mashhad*; the crowds gathering east of Ascalon's ruined walls, with some young men watching from sycamore trees; the procession flags stacked and the crowd watching some dervishes chant and dance; then the procession arrives in the open courtyard of the *mashhad*. Finally, we see some mounted celebrants who had taken part in horse racing.⁸³

In the 1940s, Mashhad Ḥusayn was among the five major pilgrimage sites venerated by Palestinian Sunnis.⁸⁴ The seasonal annual rites and festivities (*mawsim*, pl. *mawāsīm*) held at these sites were part of a local cult of saints' culture, and occasions for large gatherings replete with singing, dancing, recitation of religious and secular poetry as well as of patriotic slogans, and with sports, commerce and preaching of sorts.⁸⁵ Apparently, the event was more social than religious, very much in line with Victor TURNER's assertion that pilgrimage to saints' tombs means visiting a site outside the social order, one that does not belong to any specific group or class. It is based not on religious duty but on personal motivation, sometimes for the purpose of obtaining healing or personal needs. Such popular pilgrimages do not have a heavy ritual content; they are rather informal, and full of "carnavalesque" features.⁸⁶ Like many other similar festivals, it was only loosely connected with the alleged burial place of the saint, a phenomenon noted by Gustave VON GRUNEBaum.⁸⁷ Palestinian eyewitnesses who had documented the festival stress its national and folkloristic dimensions, designating it, intermittently, as *sha'bi* – of the people, *waṭani* – patriotic, *qawmī* – national.⁸⁸

83 For the photos taken during the festival in Majdal, on the beach and at the *mashhad*, see Library of Congress, Matson (Eric G. and Edith) Photograph Collection, LC-DIG-matpc-21670 to 21691.

84 Tewfik CANAAN documented sixteen seasonal feasts; the major ones being: al-Nabī Mūsā near Jericho, celebrated on April before Easter; al-Nabī Rūbīn between Jaffa and Isdūd (near present-day Palmaḥīm), celebrated during August; Sayyidunā 'Alī b. 'Alīm (also read 'Ulaym, or 'Ulayl) in Arsūf (today Herzliya), known as *mawsim al-Ḥaram* during the summer's melon season; al-Nabī Šāliḥ in Ramla, following Good Friday, and the *mawsim* of Wādī al-Naml and Mashhad al-Ḥusayn: CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints*, 214–215.

85 Mahmoud YAZBAK, "Holy shrines (*maqāmāt*) in modern Palestine/Israel and the politics of memory," in: *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-existence*, ed. Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter, Leonard Hammer, London and New York 2009, 232–249.

86 Victor TURNER, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Ithaca, 1974; V. TURNER and E. TURNER, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York, 1978. Cf. Yoram BILU, "Divine Worship and Pilgrimage to Holy Sites as Universal Phenomena," in: R. Gonen (ed.), *To the Holy Graves: Pilgrimage to the Holy Graves and Hillulot in Israel*, Jerusalem 1998, 17.

87 Gustave E. VON GRUNEBaum, *Muḥammadan Festivals*, London and New York 1958, 81.

88 E.g. Maḥmūd Šāliḥa, *Al-Majdal. Ta'rikh wa-Ḥaqāra*, Gaza 1999, 208; 'Arif AL-'ARIF, *Al-Mū-jaz fī Ta'rikh 'Asqalān*, Jerusalem 1943, 50. We thank Elli Asherov for this reference.

The *mawsim* of Arbaʿat Ayyūb (Wednesday of the prophet Job), Mashhad Ḥusayn and the nearby cemetery of Wadī al-Naml took place in springtime, in the week of the Greek-Orthodox Lent (coinciding with the week of the better known Nabī Mūsā pilgrimage). It attracted visitors from all over the rural area around Gaza, Majdal and al-Jūra (known also as Jūrat-ʿAsqalān). The participants arrived on Tuesday, dressed in their best clothes, carrying traditional sweets. They used to spend the day at the beach. According to CANAAN, sterile women “take a bath in the sea and promise: ‘If I become pregnant, O sea, I shall kill a sheep in your honour.’ In the *mōsam* of the next year, women who had received the blessing of motherhood pay their vows by the slaughter of a sheep on the shore, allowing the blood to flow into the sea, exclaiming: ‘Take your vow, O sea.’” On the following day, the festival participants marched in a parade-like fashion with flags and drums toward a grand plaza below Ascalon’s eastern wall, and at noon time they continued on to Mashhad Ḥusayn where they would amuse themselves on the hill top, returning in the evening with guests who had arrived from the nearby villages.⁸⁹

The Palestinian researcher ʿArif AL-ʿĀRIF dedicates a chapter of his 1943 *Taʾriḫ Ghazza* (History of Gaza) to popular local festivals. There he explains that Arbaʿat Ayyūb begins by the sea (where people bathe in the hope of being cured by God, like the prophet Ayyūb, and water their camels with the salty water as a measure against disease); carries on in Wadī al-Naml (where people assemble, carrying banners and foodstuff, to eat, sing and dance and recite patriotic poetry), and ends with a visit to Maqām Ḥusayn. In a booklet he dedicates to a summary of the history of Ascalon (also in 1943) he notes that some people think that Ḥusayn was martyred and buried in Ascalon, while the prevailing opinion is that his head is buried in the shrine; both opinions, however, are baseless.⁹⁰ AL-ʿĀRIF concludes his description of the festival with a conjecture about the origins of this festival and of its like in other regions of Palestine. “It is said,” he notes, “that it was set up by Saladin, who had hoped to stop, in this manner, the massive stream of Christian pilgrimage, which had afflicted the Holy Land as a result of the Crusades.”⁹¹ DABBĀGH raises a different conjecture, bringing us back to the Fāṭimids: that the festival has its roots in a celebration known as Khamīs al-ʿAhd – Thursday of the Covenant, allegedly held under the Fāṭimids,

⁸⁹ CANAAN, *Mohammedan Saints*, 135–136; Walid Khalidi (ed.), *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, Washington D. C. 1992, 116).

⁹⁰ AL-ʿĀRIF, *Al-Mūjaz*, 49–50.

⁹¹ AL-ʿĀRIF, *Taʾriḫ Ghazza*, Jerusalem 1943, 326–327. As far as we know, there is nothing to support this conjecture in the medieval Arabic sources.

three days before Easter.⁹² The Palestinian journalist Maḥmūd ṢĀLIḤA, who in 1947, as a youth, attended what was to be the last *mawsim* on site, also mentions the rites of bathing in the sea for the cure of skin disease and barrenness. He transcribes texts of some of the songs that were sung on that occasion. Regarding the second day of the festival, he mentions the raising of a banner with the inscription “Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī” by the *imām* of the mosque of Majdal, sitting atop a horse. A long and merry procession of men, women and children, members of Sufi orders, musicians, and scouts then accompanied him and made its way along the 4 km separating the mosque of Majdal from Maqām Ḥusayn. The excitement reached its peak at the shrine, with the crowd dancing dabka, singing and reciting patriotic songs (i.e. against the Zionists and British), love lyrics and local folk songs.⁹³

1948–1950

After the Israeli conquest of the area in November 1948, the prospects for the shrine’s conservation bode well initially. On 25 October 1949 Shmuel Yeivin, director of the Department of Antiquities, wrote to J. W. Hirschberg, director of the Muslim and Druze Department in the Ministry of Religions, that he had visited the building known as “A-Nabī Ḥusain” on a hill east of Ascalon’s Crusader Wall and found it deserted and quite unclean, though the structure itself suffered almost no damage. Yeivin proposed that Hirschberg’s department clean the building and the yard, assemble the scattered religious books, lock the compound and designate it as a holy place, undoubtedly ancient according to the Antiquities Ordinance.⁹⁴ Unfortunately, Hirschberg did not include the *mashhad* among the sites he and his colleagues in the Committee for Preservation of Muslim Religious Buildings chose to describe in a richly documented book of 1950;⁹⁵ in his preface, the Minister of Religious Affairs, Rabbi Yehuda L. Maimon, wrote that he had “instructed the appropriate department of [his] Ministry to protect places of

⁹² DABBĀGH, *Bilādunā*, 1/2:150.

⁹³ Maḥmūd ṢĀLIḤA, *Al-Majdal. Ta’rikh wa-Ḥaqāra*, Gaza 1999, 210–229.

⁹⁴ IAA Archives, Israel Administrative Inspection Files (hereafter: IAIF), Ascalon 4/91 (Ascalon/Nabī Ḥusain), No. 41. On Yeivin’s activities as director of the Department of Antiquities see Raz KLETTER, *Just Past? The Making of Israeli Archaeology*, London and Oakville 2006, 23–26, 55–59, 79–81 et passim.

⁹⁵ Leo A. MAYER, J. PINKERFELD and Joachim W. [Hayyim Z.] HIRSCHBERG, *Some Principal Muslim Religious Buildings in Israel*, Jerusalem 1950. The edifices recorded are those of Yavne, Ramleh, Lydda, Jaffa, Ḥaram Sidnā ‘Alī, Haifa, Acre, Ṣafed, Tiberias and some smaller places. The text is replicated in three languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English.

worship and graveyards which had been abandoned by the Muslim community when it departed from the country,” and expressed his “hope that every inhabitant of our country will appreciate the sincere efforts which have been and will be made to this end.”⁹⁶

This sentiment was not, however, universally shared. On 24 July 1950 an alarmed Yeivin dispatched a letter to Ya'qov Pat at the Ministry of Defense – with a copy to the Chief of Staff, Yigael Yadin – complaining that the Army had recently blown up “the large building within the ruins of Ascalon known as Maqām a-Nabī Ḥusain that is sacred to the Muslim community” and he demanded that the commander responsible for this transgression of explicit Army directives be courtmartialed. Yeivin added that the mosque in the deserted village of Isdūd was blown up at the same time. Yadin – the archaeologist-general who four years earlier had published and analyzed the Ayyūbid inscription of the mosque of Bayt Ḥānūn, just 14 km south of the *mashhad*⁹⁷ – instructed his adjutant: “Please find out what was blown up; why; by whose authorization.”⁹⁸ On 30 July, the adjutant transmitted these queries to Moshe Dayan, commander of Israel’s Southern Command.⁹⁹ On 4 August Pat advised Yadin to promptly initiate legal action against the transgressors.¹⁰⁰ On 9 August Yeivin reiterated his demand for a courtmartial and informed Pat that one of his staffers visited the *mashhad* and learned that a recently arrived sapper officer was responsible for its demolition.¹⁰¹

The truth was, however, different. On 30 August, Dayan wrote to the Operations Division of the General Staff that the action was carried out on his orders and that he had presented his explanations to Yadin.¹⁰² On 1 September, the puzzled commander of the Operations Division asked Yadin what he should write to Pat, and was told to write: “A distressing mistake took place and one may assume

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, unpaginated preface. On 14 August 1950, Walter Eytan, director-general of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, thanked Hirschberg for the book, remarking that it will provide political benefits, as it provides “evidence for the Government’s solicitude and affection for the institutions and religious possessions of believers in other faiths.” Israel State Archives, File G – 4724/21.

⁹⁷ Yigael SUKENIK [=Yadin], “An Ayyūbid Inscription from Beith Ḥānūn,” *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society* 12 (1945–46): 84–91 [in Hebrew; English summary on pp. vii–viii].

⁹⁸ Yeivin to Lt.-Col. Ya'qov Pat, 24. 7.50: Israel Defense Forces Archives [hereafter: IDF Archives], File 12/61/1952, p. 500; Yadin’s instructions appear in the letter’s margins. A copy of Yeivin’s copy is in IAA Archives, IAL: P/aleph/Nabī Ḥusain.

⁹⁹ Maj. Netanel Lorch to OC Southern Command, 30. 7.50: IDF Archives, File 12/61/1952, p. 499.

¹⁰⁰ Pat to Office of the Chief of Staff, 4. 8.50: *Ibid.*, 495; copy in IAA Archives, IAL: P/aleph/Nabī Ḥusain.

¹⁰¹ Yeivin to Pat, 9. 8.50: IAA Archives, *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Dayan to Operations Division, 30. 8.50: IDF Archives, File 12/61/1952, p. 493; see also pp. 496–497.

that it won't be repeated."¹⁰³ But Yeivin appears to have divined the truth at some point. On 3 September, his deputy lodged a further complaint with Pat: the great mosque of Yavne (Arabic Yibna) – originally a Frankish church, and described a short time earlier in the book published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs¹⁰⁴ – was blown up.¹⁰⁵ In a letter to Pat of 27 September, Yeivin decried “the educational, cultural and scientific loss” caused by such acts of destruction, mentioned that he had brought the issue to the attention of Yadin’s adjutant and the Prime Minister’s military secretary and confessed that he was at a loss at what else he could do.¹⁰⁶ Then, on 10 October, the director of Yadin’s office inadvertently divulged the truth: the Yavne mosque was blown up on 9 July, “that is, before it was announced that the demolition of the mosques should be stopped.”¹⁰⁷ On 27 October, Yeivin pointed out to Yadin the blatant discrepancy between this letter and the Army directives to preserve sites of archaeological or historical value, and exclaimed: “I am totally perplexed and I do not know what’s going on in our State.”¹⁰⁸ The reason for the demolition order is not spelled out in the documentation, but Dayan’s order to blow up the *mashhad* near Ascalon may have been related to his endeavors, documented from 10 November 1949 on, to transfer the Arabs of nearby Majdal to the Gaza Strip, Jordan and localities in central Israel, a transfer that was concluded on 11 October 1950.¹⁰⁹

103 Col. Ya‘qov Frolov to Chief of Staff, 1. 9.50: IDF, File 12/61/1952, p. 492; also, File 94/108/1952, p. 55. The answer to be given to Pat appears in the margins, perhaps in Yadin’s handwriting.

104 MAYER *et al.*, *Some Principal Muslim Religious Buildings*, p. 24 of the English part.

105 Ben-Dor to Pat, 3. 9.50: IAA Archives, IAIF, P/Yavne/mem.

106 Yeivin to Pat, 27. 9.50: Ibid.

107 Lt. Col. Michael Avitzur to Yeivin, 10. 10.50: Ibid.

108 Yeivin to Yadin, 27. 10.50: IDF Archives, File 35/61/1952; copy in IAA Archives, IAIF, P/Yavne/mem. See also Yeivin’s “Absolutely Personal” letter to Yadin, 1. 9.51: IDF Archives, File 171/1559/1952, p. 11. On the basis of the IDF files Meron RAPOPORT published an article, “Operation Blow Up Mosques,” *Ha-Aretz Weekly Supplement*, 6 July 2007, 22–28 (in Hebrew). Our thanks to Mr. RAPOPORT for having placed at our disposal copies of these files, which we later consulted in the IDF Archives.

109 Dov DORON, “A New Israeli Period,” in: *Ashqelon – 4,000 and Forty Years*, part 2, ed. David Appel, Tel Aviv 1990, 43–50 (in Hebrew). The transfer was discussed in the UN Security Council: *UN Security Council Official Records*, 511th Meeting, 16 October; 514th Meeting, 20 October 1950; 517th Meeting, 30 October; 518th Meeting, 6 November; 522nd Meeting, 15 November; 524th Meeting, 17 November 1950. For Resolution S/1907 of 17 November 1950 see *Resolutions and Decisions of the Security Council, 1950*, 10.

Pilgrimage revived

In 1970 the hill with its demolished shrine became part of the premises of the Bar-zilai Medical Center, which had the area leveled and covered with lawns; in 1979, answering a query of the Department of Antiquities, the Center's administrative director claimed that it had not been aware that the hill was a protected antiquity site.¹¹⁰ Yet Muslims continued to venerate the site and one could from time to time see small groups of worshipers coming there; a carved stone indicated the place where the head of Ḥusayn was once buried.¹¹¹ A new phase in the history of the *mashhad* started in 1980 as a result of an accidental meeting in a Cairo hotel between Moshe Hananel – a Jerusalemite entrepreneur of tourism and a keen student of history, who arrived with a group of Israeli tourists in the wake of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty that had been signed a year earlier – and a large group of Dā'ūdī Bohras from India, led by Muḥammad Burhān al-Dīn.¹¹²

To understand who the Dā'ūdī Bohras are, we must return briefly to al-Afḍal Shāhanshāh, the son of the vizier Badr al-Jamālī and chief commander of the Fāṭimid army who, as we have seen, was said to have initiated the cult of Ḥusayn's head at Ascalon. After the death of the caliph al-Mustansīr in 487/1094, al-Afḍal dispossessed and later executed the caliph's eldest son, Nizār, and put on the throne the caliph's youngest son Aḥmad, to whom he gave the throne name al-Musta'li. This led to a split of the Ismā'īlī Shī'is into the Nizārīs of Persia, Iraq and Syria, and the Musta'lis of Egypt, Yemen and Gujarāt in western India. The first Ismā'īlī *dā'i*, or “summoner,” had arrived in Gujarāt in 460/1067–68, and the local Ismā'īlī converts, mostly of Hindu origin, came to be known as Bohras, the term probably deriving from the Gujarātī verb *vohorvū*, which means “to trade.”

The assassination of al-Musta'li's son, the caliph al-Āmir, in 524/1130, brought about a split among the Musta'lis: the Ḥāfiẓīs recognized al-Āmir's cousin Ḥāfiẓ as caliph and imam, while the Ṭayyibīs acknowledged al-Āmir's infant son al-Ṭayyib as the rightful heir. The Ḥāfiẓīs were preponderant in Egypt until the suppression of the Fāṭimid dynasty in 1171, whereas the strongholds of the Ṭayyibīs were in Yemen and Gujarāt. Though the infant al-Ṭayyib was probably murdered, the Ṭayyibīs believe that he was hidden away and founded a line of hidden imams that continues to the present day. Therefore the Ṭayyibīs have been led since 1132

¹¹⁰ Y. Harari, administrative director of the Center, to Yosef Porat, District Archaeologist, 18 March 1979. IAA Archives, IAIF: P/Ashqelon/mem/4/91.

¹¹¹ Interview with Ami Greitzer, administrative director of the Center until 1990, 9 August 2013. Possibly the stone was identical to the “fragment of a pillar” mentioned by Tewfik CANAAN.

¹¹² Interview with Moshe Hananel, 5 April 2013.

by a *dā'ī muṭlaq*, that is, “a summoner with absolute authority,” empowered to oversee the believers as the vice-regent of the hidden imam. The *dā'ī muṭlaq*s resided in Yemen and supervised from there the Ṭayyibī Bohras of Gujarāt, whose numbers were growing as a result of Hindu conversion but who suffered persecution in the fifteenth century at the hand of Sunnī sultans. Nevertheless, the Ṭayyibī Bohras became far more numerous than the Ṭayyibīs of Yemen, who in 923/1517 came under Ottoman rule, and so it came about that in 974/1567 a Bohra *dā'ī muṭlaq* transferred the Ṭayyibī headquarters from Yemen to Gujarāt.

The Ṭayyibīs split into Dā'ūdīs and Sulaymānīs after 999/1591, when Dā'ūd Burhān al-Dīn's succession as *dā'ī muṭlaq* was contested by Sulaymān b. Ḥasan: most of the Gujarātī Bohras recognized Dā'ūd Burhān al-Dīn, who resided in India, whereas most of the Yemeni Ṭayyibīs acknowledged his rival. The Dā'ūdī Bohras prospered under Mughal domination (persecution under Emperor Awrangzib was an exception) and later under British rule as a wealthy merchant community, but internal strife erupted time and again.¹¹³

In more recent times, the Dā'ūdī Bohras came to be divided into a traditionalist majority and a reformist minority that challenges the *dā'ī muṭlaq*'s authority with regard to matters unrelated to religion. The fifty-first *dā'ī muṭlaq*, Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn b. Muḥammad Burhān al-Dīn (1333–1385/1915–1965), largely succeeded in neutralizing dissenters and in ensuring his paramount authority by claiming infallibility in matters of doctrine, guiding believers in matters spiritual and temporal and securing compliance by the threat of excommunication (replaced in the 1950s by a threat of social ostracism). At the same time he sponsored secular as well as religious education and opened up the community to those facets of modernity that did not run counter basic religious beliefs. He was also the first *dā'ī muṭlaq* to visit the Bohra communities outside of India, to pilgrimage to the Fāṭimid shrines of Cairo and Syria and to accentuate the Bohras' association with the Muslim world at large by hosting visiting Muslim dignitaries, by presenting draperies to the Ka'ba and cenotaphs to Cairene shrines (among them Ra's Ḥusayn) or by donating to the anti-Zionist Palestine Fund.¹¹⁴ In 1937, while

113 For detailed accounts see DAFTARY, *The Ismā'īlīs*, 256–323; idem, *A Short History of the Ismā'īlīs: Traditions of a Muslim Community*, Edinburgh 1998, 106–114, 185–193; Jonah BLANK, *Mullahs on the Mainframe: Islam and Modernity among the Da'udi Bohras*, Chicago and London 2001, 33–52.

114 Shibani ROY, *The Dawoodi Bohras – An Anthropological Perspective*, Delhi 1984, 43–47; DAFTARY, *The Ismā'īlīs*, 313; BLANK, *Mullahs*, 52, 159–160, 185, 211, 215–217, 238–239; Saifiyah Qutbuddin, “History of the Da'ūdī Bohra Ṭayyibīs in Modern Times: The *Dā'īs*, the *Da'wat* and the Community,” in: Farhad DAFTARY, ed., *A Modern History of the Ismā'īlīs: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, London 2011, 301–305, 310–311; 314–317, 321, 324–325; Tahera QUTBUD-DIN, “Da'ūdī Bohra Ṭayyibīs: Literature, Learning and Social Practice,” in: Ibid., 342–343.

on his way to King George VI's coronation in London, he stopped in Palestine, met with the leaders of its Arab community¹¹⁵ and paid a visit to the *mashhad* in Ascalon.

Although his son, Muḥammad Burhān al-Dīn, the fifty-second *dā'ī muṭlaq* (1385–1435/1965–2014), was less interested in secular matters, the Dā'ūdī Bohras, male and female, became under his aegis ever more educated and professionalized, and the schools he established taught religious and secular subjects side by side. Yet he went beyond the rejection of anti-traditionalist aspects of modernization and imposed on the believers a normative dress code – beards, white knee-length cotton shirts and trousers for men, *burqas* and bonnet-like veils for women – that was to manifestly proclaim each individual's membership in the community. He also repeatedly visited Dā'ūdī Bohra groups all over the world and highlighted the Bohras' Fāṭimid identity by reviving various aspects of Fāṭimid culture and by restoring Fāṭimid and Shī'ī shrines in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, most notably the reconstruction in 1980 of Jāmi' al-Anwār, the huge mosque which the Fāṭimid caliph al-Ḥākim built in Cairo. Consequently he came to be known in the Arab world as “the Fāṭimid *dā'ī*” or as “Sulṭān al-Bohra,” who encouraged believers to go on pilgrimage to burial places of imams and *dā'īs* in Egypt and Yemen.¹¹⁶ The number of believers was estimated in 2001 as between 700,000 and one million worldwide.¹¹⁷

The 1980 meeting between Moshe Hananel and Muhammad Burhān al-Dīn took place in Cairo when the latter came there for the inauguration of the Anwār Mosque. Hananel was greatly impressed by the Indian leader, all the more so when he noticed how local Sunni Muslims honored him. Burhān al-Dīn told

115 The Hebrew newspaper *Davar* reported on 16 April 1937 that the Bohra “Sulṭān” intended to arrive in Palestine with 400 of his followers, on the way to the London coronation. Subsequently the newspaper reported that on 7 May he visited Bethlehem and Hebron, accompanied by the Mufti Ḥāj Amin Al-Ḥusaynī, and donated money to poor Christians of Bethlehem. The *Palestine Post* reported on 6 May 1937 that “Sulṭān Bohra, accompanied by 150 people, arrived yesterday to Jerusalem by train and he met with the High Arab Committee and the Supreme Muslim Council at Lydda. The Mufti and sheikhs of the Supreme Muslim Council received him in Jerusalem and the Mufti delayed his travel to London in order to meet the Sulṭān.” The newspaper presented him as a rich and munificent leader of a community of two million Indian Muslims (their Ismā'īli observance went unmentioned). It is noteworthy that a Bohra travelers' lodge existed in Jerusalem in 1920: BLANK, *Mullahs*, 140.

116 Muṣṭafā 'ABDULḤUSSEIN, “Burhānuddīn, Sayyidnā Muḥammad,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito, New York and Oxford, 1995, 1:237–238; Blank, *Mullahs*, 138–140, 174–175, 184–190, 197–198; QUTBUDDIN, “History,” 306–308.

117 BLANK, *Mullahs*, 13. In 1990, DAFTARY gave the estimate of 500,000 and in 1998 – 700,000: DAFTARY, *The Ismā'īlis*, 314; idem, *A Short History*, 192.

Hananel that in 1937, at the age of 26, he had accompanied his father on the visit to Palestine that had included the Ascalon *mashhad*, and he expressed a wish to revisit the site. When somewhat later the two approached the site of the erstwhile *mashhad*, Burhān al-Dīn recognized in the southern part of the Barzilai Medical Center, on a grass-covered hill overlooking the sea, the place he had visited with his father.¹¹⁸ Yet conservation architect Giora Solar, who assisted the Bohra in their search for the place where Husayn's head had been buried, relates that they did not insist on pinpointing the exact location.¹¹⁹

Burhān al-Dīn's visit in 1980 ushered in a Dā'ūdī Bohra pilgrimage to Israel and Palestine, with a prayer at the site of the ruined *mashhad* as its highlight. This pilgrimage was in line with Burhān al-Dīn's promotion of visits to Ismā'īlī burial sites for the purpose of reinforcing communal cohesiveness, whereas Ḥananel organized the pilgrimages as touristic endeavors. As Israel had no diplomatic relations with India and other Muslim countries of Bohra residence, a special government resolution for allowing the Bohra members to enter Israel was needed. The solution adopted was to recognize the Dā'ūdī Bohras as a "tribe," i.e. that whosoever belongs to their community, regardless of his or her nationality, would be able to enter Israel, including citizens of countries hostile to it, such as Pakistan.¹²⁰

In the 1990s, Burhān al-Dīn sought to construct an edifice that would commemorate the demolished *mashhad*, and Hananel endeavored to assist him in achieving government approval. The Barzilai Medical Center objected to the erection of a new building on the site where the *mashhad* had stood, but agreed to allow a modest memorial – a prayer dais enclosed by a low wall that would not necessitate a formal building permit.¹²¹ Dr. Nissim Dana, head of the Department of Religious Sects in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, was asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as by Ḥananel, to approve the memorial initiative. After having met Burhān al-Dīn in East Jerusalem, Dana issued a positive recommendation to the Barzilai Center. Thereupon Burhān al-Dīn erected in 2000 a prayer platform of 8.6 × 8.4 meters, enclosed by a 1-meter wall, all built of marble imported from Agra [Fig. 5].¹²² Actually it is an open-air mosque with a prominent *mihrāb*; the straight segments of its low wall are decorated with 52 identical

¹¹⁸ Interview with Moshe Hananel, 5 April 2013.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Giora Solar, 9 May 2014.

¹²⁰ Interview with Moshe Hananel, 8 October 2013.

¹²¹ Interview with Dr. Shimon Scharf, 26 August 2013.

¹²² Interview with Prof. Nissim Dana, 9 August 2013.



Fig. 5: The prayer platform today (photo: B. Z. Kedar)

pointed arches, grouped in threes and fours that are the defining elements of the neo-Fāṭimid style favored by the Dā'ūdī Bohras.¹²³

The number 52 evidently evokes Burhān al-Dīn, the fifty-second *dā'ī muṭlaq*.¹²⁴ On Ḥananel's advice, the center of each arch is decorated by a hexagram – that is, by two equilateral triangles intersecting one another – which Jews regard as the Star of David, but which appears also repeatedly in medieval Islamic art. Hananel's intention was to disguise thereby the edifice's true nature and prevent vandalism by extremist Jews.¹²⁵ The edifice was hidden from public view; few Israelis

¹²³ On this style see Paula SANDERS, "Bohra Architecture and the Restoration of Fatimid Culture," in: *L'Egypte fatimide: Son art et histoire. Actes du colloque organisé à Paris les 28, 29 et 30 mai 1998*, ed. Marianne Barrucand, Paris 1999, 159–165, esp. p. 161.

¹²⁴ The *mihrāb* consists of five further arches, possibly alluding to the five members of the *ahl al-kisā'* of Shī'ī tradition, i.e. Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Our thanks to Prof. Etan Kohlberg for this explication.

¹²⁵ Interview with Moshe Hananel, 8 October 2013. See also Moshe Hananel, "Ashkelon's Golgotha", *Eretz va-Teva* 87 (Sept.–Oct. 2003): 43–46 (in Hebrew).

know about it. As Dana put it, “they [i.e. Muslims] built something handsome and modest that does not offend or hurt anybody.”¹²⁶ Nevertheless, the memorial raised some opposition.

A couple of months after the new *mashhad* started to attract Dā’ūdī Bohra pilgrims, Dr. Dov Nahlieli, the regional inspector of the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) – the successor organization of Yeivin’s Department of Antiquities – stumbled upon the edifice that had been constructed without his permission, although the entire area has been officially proclaimed a protected antiquity site. On his recommendation, the IAA filed a complaint against the Barzilai Medical Center and its director for violating the Law of Antiquities and demanded that the edifice be destroyed. In retrospect, Nahlieli justified his initiative claiming that “they should not erect mosques in such places, let alone this is [a] Shī’a [place], and Waqf people may come and say that this is their holy place.”¹²⁷ During deliberations with the police and the Center the director of the IAA, Shuka Dorfman (1950–2014), expressed the concern that the *mashhad* may attract Shī’ī pilgrims as well as extremist Islamists who may demand the return of ownership of the site.¹²⁸ Nahlieli relates that the IAA could not obtain a court decision to demolish the *mashhad* but was able to prevent further work at the site and the paving of a special road to their holy site.¹²⁹ IAA deputy director, Uzi Dahari, put it differently: “There was no staff-work-based policy on this issue ... IAA administration was divided about the matter. I thought that it [the edifice] does not disturb ... these people come from afar, not from the Arab World, and we are in a process of peace with the [Muslim] East ... Nahlieli was backed by Dorfman ... finally he [Dorfman] understood that the IAA should not take sides ... should not take a political step. He realized that this is a redundant battle ...” Dahari justified the change in the IAA position by saying that no antiquities were harmed during the edifice’s construction, therefore there was no violation of the Antiquities Law. He added that he does not remember the police consulting the IAA before taking its final decision.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Interview with Prof. Nissim Dana, 9 August 2013.

¹²⁷ Interview with Dr. Dov Nahlieli, 2 October 2013.

¹²⁸ Interview with Dr. Shimon Scharf, 26 August 2013 and with Eitan Cohen, his aide at the time and the present-day deputy director of the Barzilai Center, 2 October 2013.

¹²⁹ Interview, 2 October 2013 and email exchange of 19 January 2014.

In a letter of 29 October 2002 the IAA Ashkelon archaeologist Pirhiyya Nahshoni informs the contractor Eyal Cohen that as the area in question is a protected antiquity site, the mosque has been erected illegally and the IAA does not authorize any repair or development of the “marble platform.” The letter is kept at the archives of the IAA Southern district.

¹³⁰ Interview with Uzi Dahari, 2 March 2014. Gaia Polat, adviser to Limor Livnat, Minister of Culture and Sport, sent on 28 November 2013 a letter to the third author of the present article, in

After deliberations between the *mashhad* entrepreneurs and the police, the latter decided to close the file as devoid of public interest.¹³¹ Hence, the *mashhad* received retroactive legitimization of sorts. In 2011, the Council for the Preservation of Heritage Sites in Israel together with the Ashqelon Municipality erected a sign that relates the history of the site (albeit with grave mistakes), describes the present-day edifice as Mashhad Ḥusayn built in the 1990s [sic], but neglects to mention the demolition of the original edifice in 1950.¹³² The site still lacks official recognition and protection by the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Since 1980, many thousands Dā'ūdī Bohra pilgrims mostly from India but many from Pakistan and some from Indonesia visited Ashqelon and about once a year Burhān al-Dīn used to join them despite pressure from Islamic countries who call to boycott Muslim tourism to Israel.¹³³ The Bohra pilgrimage has a fixed itinerary, with pilgrims coming from Egypt or Syria via Jordan to Israel. Women and children join their men in the pilgrimage journeys to Ashqelon where they pray together.¹³⁴ A special Bohra printed tour-guide in the Gujarātī language includes Gaza, Ashqelon, Hebron, Ramla and Jerusalem. Al-Ḥaram al-Sharīf as well as the tombs of David and Samuel are also Bohra pilgrimage destinations.¹³⁵

The Dā'ūdī Bohras constitute the majority of the pilgrims to Mashhad Ḥusayn today. But the site attracts also a few hundred Israeli Shī'īs who arrive on 20 Ṣafar of the Hijrī calendar to mourn the martyrdom of Ḥusayn in Karbalā'.¹³⁶ Also, some Sunni Muslims still maintain an attachment to the site and small groups of former inhabitants of the Palestinian town Majdal (today the Migdal neighborhood of Ashqelon), who fled or were transferred to Gaza, have been occasionally allowed to visit it.¹³⁷

which she maintained that the minister had not dealt with the issue at all and that it had been handled solely by the IAA.

131 Interview with Eitan Cohen, 2 October 2013.

132 Interview with Dr. Avi Sasson and Gad Sobol (October 2013) who drafted the text; they disclosed that the decision to leave the demolished *mashhad* unmentioned was taken by the Council for the Preservation of Heritage Sites.

133 Interview with Moshe Hananel, 2 June 2013.

134 Interview with Ami Greitzer and Pnina Greitzer, 9 August 2013.

135 Interview with Moshe Hananel, 2 June 2013.

136 Interview with Dr. Khālīd Sindāwī who has studied the Shī'īs in Israel, 12 October, 2013. See *Sindāwī*, "The Head," 264–273; *idem*, "Are There any Shī'ite Muslims in Israel?" *Holy Land Studies* 7 (Nov. 2008): 183–199.

137 A Sūfī cleric from Gaza was granted permission in the 2000s to visit the site privately for fulfilling his personal vow. Interview with Moshe Hananel, 2 June 2013.

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