

Muslim Places of Pilgrimage and Their Adjacent Spaces

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Sacred spaces and places have since been regarded as pilgrimages. One may question why cities such as Najaf or Karbala in Iraq, or Qom and Mashhad in Iran, are regarded as shrine cities, and what make their pilgrimage center. The present paper attempts to have a structural view of such pilgrimages.

By structure, it is meant a set of elements arranged and ordered in a certain *syntagmatic* way such that they make a well-defined, and meaningful system. [1] To Muslims, a shrine is viewed as a well-defined, meaningful system such that not only it has a structure, but also approaching and entering it requires a certain set of religious deeds to be performed in a prescribed way, as instructed and prescribed by top-ranking religious authorities. As such, it plays certain religious functions, i.e., particular religious, or religion-oriented, roles in the life of Muslims, too.

Islamic places of pilgrimages are comprised of sacred spots and places that are connected in some way to Islam and other Divine religions, hence held in great religious esteem. It follows that there are a number of non-Islamic, but Divine, places of pilgrimages that Muslims venerate. Examples of such places are the tombs of Adam and Noah who are buried side by side with the first Infallible Imam ʿAlī in Najaf, Iraq. This historical fact is asserted in a pilgrimage supplication (ziarat-text), originally issued by the sixth Infallible Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq in favor of Imam ʿAlī, and quoted by Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. Qūluwayh al-Qummī (d. 367 AH/ 977) [2] and Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Nuʿmān al-Baghdādī "al-Mufid (d. 413 AH/ 1022) [3].

Structurally and at its minimum, there must be a sacred nucleus. This pilgrimage-worthy nucleus consists of a spot sacralized or consecrated due to the presence of a high-ranking religious personality, often a Divine prophet or an Infallible Imam. In some instances, the sacralized spot may not be a tomb, but a location directly associated with the Almighty, e.g., the Kaabah in Mecca; where a Divine prophet was present, e.g., the Abraham Site (in Arabic, Maqām Ibrāhīm) by the Kaabah, or where an Infallible Imam paused for short while, e.g., Qadamgāh (The Footprint of the eighth Infallible Imam Reza) near Neyshabur, northeast Iran; Khutwah al-Imam ʿAlī, in Basrah, southeast Iraq; or simply a mosque built at the

instance of a Divine prophet, e.g., the Qubā Mosque that was the first mosque built at the order of the Prophet Muḥammad in the vicinity of Medina, or the Jamkaran Mosque that was built at the order of the twelfth Infallible Imam al-Mahdī (b. 255 AH/ 868) in the village of Jamkaran near Qom, Iran.

The pilgrimage-worthy nucleus may also contain the whole body of a certain highly saint personality or a martyr. Instances of where the whole body is buried abound: the bodies of the second Infallible Imam al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī, the fourth Infallible Imam ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, the fifth Infallible Imam Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, and sixth Infallible Imam Ja‘far b. Muḥammad are buried in the westerly side of the al-Baqī‘ Cemetery, situated to the east of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Outside Medina, the region of Uḥud contains the (now leveled) tomb of Ḥamzah, the paternal uncle of the Prophet Muḥammad who was martyred in the Battle of Uḥud in 3 AH/ 625. These are just some pilgrimage-worthy nucleuses. They have long been left without any supportive grating, although they used to have such supports before the domination of the Wahhabis in Arabia. The sacred tombs of the four Infallible Imams buried in the al-Baqī‘ Cemetery used to be covered by a grating, a building, and a dome over them. It is a pity that the Wahhabis levelled the whole shrine in 1344 AH/ 1925.

There are places of pilgrimage whereat some body organs, or relics, of a martyr are buried. An example of such a place is the Ru‘ūs al-Shuhadā’ Cemetery, Bāb al-Ṣaghīr, in Damascus, where the severed heads of some of the Ashura martyrs have been buried. In Cairo, Egypt, there is a mosque named after Imam al-Ḥusayn, for it is believed that his severed head had been buried there. Although it is not historically certain for sure, there is a tomb enclosed within a metal grating, and a mosque constructed around the same sacred spot.

In contrast to the above shrines where there is either the body or some body organs of a saint is buried, there is another type of shrine where no martyr or saintly figure is buried. In such a tomb-free place of pilgrimage, there is usually a certain spot where a prophet or an Infallible Imam used to stay or perform ritual prayer (salat) there. Examples of tomb-free places of pilgrimage are as follows: There are at least three tomb-free places of pilgrimage, now mosques, in Qom: Chronologically, the first one was what is commonly known as Bayt al-Nūr (lit., the Abode of Light), the same place had been the house of Mūsā b. Khazraj (d. ca. 201 AH/ 816), a renowned influential Shiite figure of Qom. At this place, Fāṭimah bt. Mūsā b. Ja‘far, widely known as "al-Ma‘šūmah" (d. 201 AH/ 816) used to stay for 17 days before her martyrdom in Qom. The second one, built in a chronological order, is the Imam Ḥasan Mosque that was built in the city center of Qom, to the northeast of the holy shrine of Fāṭimah al-Ma‘šūmah, by Aḥmad b. Ishāq al-Ash‘arī al-Qummī (d. ca. 263 AH/ 876). This mosque was built at the order of the eleventh Infallible Imam al-Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (poisoned and martyred 260 AH/ 873). The third one is the Jamkaran Mosque (in the vicinity of Qom) which was established where a Ḥasan b. Muthlih of Jamkaran had the honor of meeting the twelfth Infallible Imam al-Mahdī (b. 255 AH/ 868) on the eve of 17 Ramadan 373 AH/ 983. Ḥasan accordingly constructed a mosque at the same place at the order of Imam al-Mahdī. It is commonly believed that the prayer niche (mihrab) of this mosque is located just at the very place where Imam al-Mahdī had been sitting. Instances of tomb-free places of pilgrimage include the Ra’s al-Ḥusayn Mosque on the easterly side of the court of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria, where the severed head of Imam al-Ḥusayn (martyred in 61 AH/ 680)

used to be kept for just a couple of days. In Iraq, the al-Ḥannānah Mosque, at a distance of around 2.5 kms from Imam ʿAlī's holy shrine, along the Najaf-Kufah road, is where the severed mosque of Imam al-Ḥusayn was kept for just one night. Now, there is a tomb-free, round-shape grating constructed over the same spot where the severed head of Imam al-Ḥusayn used to be kept. Later on, a mosque was constructed around the same sacred spot. Hence, it is recommended to recite a ziarat-text, i.e., pilgrimage prayer, in favor of Imam al-Ḥusayn, by the same spot.

What is noticeable is that such precise pilgrimage spots are often surrounded by a metal grating. When a grating is constructed in protection of the venerated place, it can be regarded as a sacred core. People and pilgrims usually kiss and touch such pilgrimage cores in lieu of the tombstone enshrined within it. They pour in money, gold, or jewels within the pilgrimage core in dedication to the dignitary buried thereat. (Only selected persons, usually high-ranking clerics, are authorized to get into the grating for collecting the money, jewels, and other valuables pilgrims throw into the grating-surrounded space; only these people have the opportunity of cleaning and washing the very tombstone.)

There is usually an immediate and surrounding enclave within which the pilgrimage core is located. This usually small-space enclave, which is situated just beneath the dome of the shrine, is often very crowded on pilgrimage occasions, reckoned according to lunar calendar. For religious segregation purposes, the immediate enclave is divided into two almost equal sectors, one for men and another one for women. [4]

The same pilgrimage-spot enclave is often surrounded by a periphery which houses few adjacent mosques. Outside the mosques' area, there is at least one vast courtyard, with some offices related and associated with the shrine's management and administration. Constituting the shrine's peripheries, these offices, e.g., police station, public relations, VIP guests' reception hall, a clinic, answering religious queries, conference halls, a seminary for training clerics, are all for helping both the pilgrims and the residents of the city. [5]

Outside the outer, larger shrine, there lie the civil buildings, offices, and institutions, which make parts and parcels of the city wherein the shrine is located. Often such cities are closely associated with the spatio-temporal, or geographical-historical context wherein certain events took place. As such, and due mainly to the shrine, the city can be regarded as the shrine's territory. It is in this case that the name of the shrine's main dignitary becomes synonymous with the city. [6, 7, 8] and the city or town, make the territory of the shrine. In this way, the city comes to be regarded as a shrine city. Comparable with a spatio-temporal, or geographical-historical context, the city marks the territory within which a shrine is located, hence the city is called a shrine city. [9] On analogy with the linguistic 'feature percolation theory', it is the religious, here shrine-oriented, feature of (the main) 'shrine' (here used as both a phenomenon and a modifier) that percolates from a specifically certain sacred spot to an outer, larger radius associated with it, e.g., the city wherein it is located. In this sense, it is commonly the shrine that gives the city which is built around it this feature, not vice versa. [10, 11]

A shrine city may contain more than one venerable dignitary. The dignitaries buried may both be Infallible Imams, as in the case of Samarra, in north central Iraq, where the two Infallible Imams ʿAlī al-Hādī and his son al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī are buried. It can be said that the two Infallible Imams are co-valorous to the pilgrims, although one of them preceded the

other one in the office and mission of imamate. [12] It follows that where there are two or more Infallible Imams buried in the same shrine, they must be historically in a chronological order of birth, imamate, and martyrdom.

Another case is a shrine where contains the body of one an Infallible Imam, and the other ones being non-Infallible dignitaries. A case in point is the holy shrine of Imam al-Ḥusayn within whose shrine many other venerable personalities, e.g., his elder son ‘Alī al-Akbar (‘Alī the Elder/ Junior) is buried at his feet within the same grating. Also, at the northwest corner within the same holy sanctuary, there is the tomb of Sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb (migrated to Karbala and living there in 247 AH/ 861), who was a descendant of the seventh Infallible Imam Mūsā b. Ja‘far. Beside the sacred grating of Imam al-Ḥusayn, by around four meters from the feet of his martyred son, ‘Alī al-Akbar, there is a collective tomb of tens of the combatants who achieved martyrdom in company with Imam al-Ḥusayn on Ashura. Usually pilgrims who enter the Imam al-Ḥusayn's holy shrine start their pilgrimage with offering salaams and salutations to Imam al-Ḥusayn, his martyred elder son, ‘Alī al-Akbar, the Ashura martyrs, and then Sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb. The same sequence is observed while performing pilgrimage to the al-Kazimīyah shrine in the vicinity of Baghdad. In this holy shrine, there are the tombs of the seventh Infallible Imam Mūsā b. Ja‘far, and his grandson, the ninth Infallible Imam, Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, hence the shrine has two golden domes. In the prescribed pilgrimage etiquette, first Imam Mūsā b. Ja‘far must be paid pilgrimage, followed by the same pilgrimage to his grandson. In the pilgrimage-prayer, ziarat-text, issued for both of them, first Imam Mūsā b. Ja‘far, and then his grandson is mentioned.

As far as such a pilgrimage sequence is concerned, there is a noteworthy case that might seem an exception, while it is justifiably not the case. In the first Infallible Imam ‘Alī's holy shrine in Najaf, there are the tombs of two prophets beside his. The two prophets whom had been buried at the same spot were Adam and Noah. Whilst Noah is regarded as the first arch-prophet, yet performing pilgrimage (ziarat) [13] unto Imam ‘Alī takes precedence. The reason is simply that Imam ‘Alī, as the first Infallible Imam and the immediate successor to the Prophet Muḥammad, is regarded much superior, hence sublimer by far in status than all the other Divine prophets who preceded the Prophet Muḥammad. [14]

Notes:

[1] "A syntagmatic relation is *in praesentia*." (Saussure, 1966 [1916], p. 123; see also Saussure, 1983 [1916], p. 122); and McGregor, 1997, p. 45). It is the linearity present between the elements of a system that makes it as such. A syntagm [...] always involves an order, a linear sequence." (Joseph, 2012, p. 550)

[2] *Kāmil al-zīyārāt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn al-Amīnī (Najaf: al-Murtaḍawīyyah, 1356 AH/ 1937), p. 38.

[3] See *al-Mazār al-kabīr*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Alī Majīd al-Ḥillī (Qum: Maktabah al-‘Allāmah al-Majlisī, 1434 AH/ 2012), p. 130.

[4] The pilgrimage enclave of local, small shrines may not be segregated. This segregation has been an innovation initiated shortly after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution of Iran for the convenience of female pilgrims. The same segregation policy was adopted in the case of the Shi'i shrines in Iraq shortly after the downfall of the ex-Baathist regime and Saddam Hussein.

[5] The term 'periphery' is used here with a view to its linguistic usage, of the core vs. periphery dichotomy in modern linguistics. As such, the tomb or any pilgrimage-worthy sacred spot functions as the 'core' of a shrine or pilgrimage place, with the offices attached to it as its 'peripheries'.

[6] The 'shrine's main dignitary' refers to the main personality around whose tomb the shrine was built. For example, within the shrine of the eighth Infallible Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran, there are several outstanding Shiite dignitaries, but all of them have been overshadowed by the fame of Imam Reza.

[7] In the present-day Persian, some pilgrims from other Iranian cities prefer saying that they had been to Imam Reza, rather than to Mashhad. This is seldom done by the people who are inhabitants or residents of Mashhad.

[8] A shrine may possess some pieces of land, buildings, factories, institutions (e.g., hospital, clinic, library, or university), all endowed, devoted, and dedicated to it by some benefactors for good and all, hence they are all affiliated to it. These endowments may lie here and there, even in other countries, but run and supervised by a special body from the shrine. The shrine's administration or top-ranking cleric nominates a certain reliable person who resides in that city to act as the director or supervisor of the institution on behalf of the shrine. The holy shrines of Imam al-Ḥusayn (in Karbala) and Imam Reza (in Mashhad) have had the largest number of endowments here and there in the world.

[9] The criterion of a city's being regarded as 'a *shrine* city' must be the presence of a shrine therein. While the third Infallible Imam al-Ḥusayn's shrine makes Karbala a shrine city, does the city of al-Hillah in Iraq deserve such a title because al-Qāsim b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far is buried there? In Iran, as Shiraz has the shrine of Aḥmad b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far, can it be regarded as a shrine city? Likewise, in the city of Shush in Khuzistan, southwest Iran, there is the shrine of Daniel, who was a Jewish prophet. It seems that the designation 'a shrine city' still needs more elaboration, delineation, and refinement.

[10] According to Islamic teachings, as indicated in both the Holy Quran (e.g., in the Holy Quran, Sura al-Mā'idah [5]: 21; Sura Ṭāḥā [20]: 12; and al-Nāzi‘āt [79]: 16) and the authentic hadiths, some lands or regions are regarded as sacred. Within the realm of Abrahamic faiths examples of such sacred lands are Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Najaf, and Karbala.

[11] There may be, and usually are, more than one saintly figure in a shrine city. However, unless the saintly figures are both of equal status, in most cases the main, usually Infallible personality, is regarded the figure with whom the shrine city is associated.

[12] In Islam, there is only one Infallible Imam at any time.

[13] The word "ziarat" is the spelling recorded as the headword in both *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989) and *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (4th ed., 1993). It has got various spellings, though.

[14] The present short paper has been prepared in answer to several inquiries I have received throughout the recent years, particularly the thought-provoking questions posed by the Australian PhD student Mr. Aidan Parkes, to whom I wish to dedicate this text. I am also grateful to Mrs. Tehseen F. Merali, Sayyid Salmān Āl Tu‘mah, Chris C. Parkes, and Ian Reader.

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