PILGRIMAGE AS SHARED EXPERIENCE AMONG MUSLIMS AND JEWS IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC WORLD

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In this paper I provide an overview of Muslim and Jewish pilgrimage in the medieval Islamic world by considering the circulation of pilgrims of different religious backgrounds and sacred objects as well as the transmission of religious knowledge and popular ideas throughout the medieval Islamic world, from Andalusia and North Africa eastward to Syria and Palestine and present-day Iraq. The Mediterranean region can thus be seen as having not only facilitated pilgrimage traffic from the Islamic West and East, as well as from Europe, but also as forming part of a broader network for the veneration of holy persons and pilgrimage that connected the Mediterranean to lands beyond Greater Syria and Palestine and the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. While the canonical pilgrimage city for Jews and Christians is Jerusalem and for Muslims Mecca, Jewish, Christian and Muslim pilgrims routinely visited other pilgrimage locales throughout the Mediterranean as part of their pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Mecca. The founding, growth, and rediscovery of the pilgrimage places of the Mediterranean and the Islamic world often coincided with political changes in the latter, such as the rise and fall of dynasties as well as perceived threats from within and without. One factor was the tension that existed between the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad as well as the Sunni dynasties and their relationship with their Shi'i subjects. A second more regional factor was Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem in 1187, which led to a growth in Jewish and Muslim pilgrimages. We begin with an overview of holy persons and pilgrimage in Judaism and Islam and then discuss a number of ideas characteristic of Mediterranean pilgrimage.

A word about holy persons in Judaism and Islam

In all three monotheistic faiths, holy persons are exemplars of piety and learning, though not always embodying both, though certainly piety was the most important characteristic of a saint. In the Middle East and North Africa, holy persons came to be identified in their lifetimes and posthumously through their acts of piety and their charismatic or thaumaturgic gifts. Medieval Hebrew travel accounts frequently contain references to the *avot* (the ancestors), the *ẓaddiqim* (the righteous), and the *qedoshim* (the holy ones). Likewise in various Islamic sources one commonly finds references to the prophets and patriarchs, the Companions and Followers of the Prophet Muḥammad, ascetics, *awliyā'* (saints, the Friends of God), pious and righteous individuals.

Brief overview of pilgrimage

In Judaism the commandment to make pilgrimage is mentioned in the Torah (Exodus 23:17 and 34:23 and Deuteronomy 16:16).

The Hajj or Pilgrimage to Mecca, mentioned in Qur'an 3:96-97, is the fifth pillar of Islam. It occurs annually from the 8th to the 12th of the twelfth Islamic month of Dhū'l-Ḥijja, and it is incumbent upon all able-bodied Muslims possessing the financial means to undertake it once in their lifetimes.

The 'umra or "lesser pilgrimage" (mentioned in Qur'ān 2:196 along with the ḥajj) is commendable, though not obligatory and may be performed at any time throughout the year, with the exception of the 8th to the 10th of Dhū'l-Ḥijja as well as in conjunction with the ḥajj.

Certain pious visitations or pilgrimages (*ziyāras*) developed partly in response to the inability of Jews and Muslims to visit Jerusalem during the Crusader period prior to Saladin's conquest of the city. Likewise Pilgrimage to Mecca often involved great expense and was thus limited to the political and religious elite, wealthy merchants, or those who lived in close proximity. Local customs of the veneration of the special dead became widespread among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Mediterranean pilgrimage

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, pilgrims, and merchants traversed the Mediterranean on their way to pilgrimage places in the Near East. The tomb of Ezekiel in Iraq, at Kifl south of Baghdad, offers one of the best documented examples of a trans-regional pilgrimage site that attracted pilgrims from across the Mediterranean region and beyond. In the case of Jewish travelers, the shrines of Ezekiel and Ezra the Scribe at Basra attracted Mediterranean and European pilgrims, including Benjamin of Tudela and Petaḥya of Regensburg during the second half of the 12th century

and the Muslim ascetic and pilgrim Al-Harawī (d. 1215 CE).

In the Christian and Muslim contexts, the healing shrine of the icon of the Virgin Mary at Ṣaydnāyā, outside Damascus, attracted pilgrims from around the Mediterranean region. Indeed, Crusader knights petitioned the Ayyubid rulers of Damascus for access. The earliest recorded example is from 1186 CE, one year prior to Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem.

Pilgrimage guides and traveler accounts

The only extant specimen of a pilgrimage guide for the entire Islamic world is ʿAlī b. Abī Bakr al-Harawī's (d. 1215 CE) Kitāb al-Ishārāt ilā Maʿrifat al-Ziyārāt (*Guide to Knowledge of Pilgrimage Places*), which includes Muslim and Christian pilgrimage sites around the Mediterranean, including Sicily, Trapani, Crete, and Constantinople. The *Guide* also mentions a number of significant Jewish pilgrimage sites in Greater Syria and elsewhere. Al-Harawī was an ascetic, a minor scholar, mystic, preacher, and emissary for Saladin. He provides significant details about the beliefs and practices of the Byzantines and Franks around the Mediterranean.

Two further sources of importance are the itineraries of Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217 CE) and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368 CE). The Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr, who set out on Pilgrimage to Mecca in 1183, offers in his *Riḥla* (*Travels*) detailed descriptions of shrines throughout the southern and eastern Mediterranean regions, including Cairo, Jerusalem, and Damascus. He also gives a detailed account of the Kaʿba and the shrines of Mecca and Medina.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the Amazigh (Berber) traveler, whose journey of 24 years was unsurpassed by any other medieval or early-modern traveler, describes in detail the shrines and pilgrimage practices in Cairo, Iraq, and elsewhere in his own *Riḥla* (*Travels*).

The Jewish communities of the Islamic world never developed pilgrimage guides although they did record itineraries and shrine inventories, as attested to in the Cairo Geniza, a cache of documents discovered during the 19th century in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fusṭāṭ (Old Cairo).

The first itinerary is the 12th century Iberian traveler Benjamin of Tudela's *Travels*. Benjamin was likely motivated by wanderlust, more specifically a desire to record the Jewish communities he encountered along the way as well as Jewish shrines throughout the Mediterranean and the Islamic world. Not only does he record the tombs of the prophets and patriarchs and the Talmudic sages in Palestine, but he also describes at length the trans-regional shrine of Ezekiel south of Baghdad, which was renowned for its healing properties and for protecting the traveler's property from theft. It attracted Jewish and Muslim pilgrims from Egypt and the Islamic West. A more detailed account of the shrine is to be found in Petaḥyah of Regensburg's *Itinerary*.

One also encounters local traditions, reflected in the accounts of Egyptian and other Jewish communities such as that of an Egyptian Jew writing around ca. 1371. Visiting the shrine of Aaron at Petra, this traveler goes so far as to pray for both Muslims and Jews.

Categories for studying pilgrimage and the veneration of saints in the medieval Islamic world

The following six categories may be applied to the study of pilgrimage and the veneration of saints in the Mediterranean and Islamic world:

1. Circulation of men and women of piety and learning. It was common for scholars and Sufis to travel to far-flung regions of the Islamic world to seek knowledge from those around them. Scholars would receive licenses from Shaykhs to teach Qur'an, *ḥadīth* (the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad) and the religious sciences.

2. The quest for knowledge about the scriptural past and the righteous ancestors. In each of the traditions one finds believers trying to rediscover their scriptural past by seeking tangible manifestations or links such as tombs, shrines, and sacred markers, e.g., talismanic designs and objects. Traditions related to the Companions and Followers of the Prophet Muḥammad and their burial places provided a major impetus for travelers and pilgrims to seek out their burial places. This is illustrated by al-Harawī's *Guide*, which enumerates the burial places of the Prophets and Patriarchs, as well as those of the Companions and Followers. Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and other travelers took an interest in recording the traditions concerning the burial places of holy persons. Likewise the accounts of Benjamin of Tudela and Petaḥyah of Regensburg sought to communicate to their co-religionists back home a sense of the holiness of the tombs and shrines of the prophets and patriarchs and the Talmudic sages.

3. Circulation of sacred objects and substances. Among North African Muslim scholars returning from Damascus and Baghdad, patterns of the Prophet Muḥammad's sandals were common. The teaching colleges (*madrasas*) of Damascus housed the sandals until the 14th century. Another example is the oil from the shrine of the Virgin Mary at Ṣaydnāyā. There is no mention in medieval Muslim accounts of the efficaciousness of the holy oil (in some accounts perspiration is exuded by the icon).

4. The pilgrimage imaginary. This refers to the process of conceiving, visualizing, experiencing, perhaps subconsciously, and articulating one's experiences: Expressions such as: "I saw brilliant lights" or "pillars of fire" or "I smelt a sweet fragrance" emanating from a tomb were common. Most pilgrims observed and commented on the efficacious and meritorious qualities of these pilgrimage places. Events from the scriptural past were given popular expression. A physical link to the past was required to vouchsafe the authenticity of a particular pilgrimage site.

5. Centers for the transmission of knowledge. In addition to Mecca, which was a center of learning, the Seljuks, Ayyubids, and other dynasties founded teaching colleges that were often in close proximity to tombs and shrines and contained sacred objects such as venerable copies of the Qur'an or the relics (i.e., the sacred objects) of the Prophet Muḥammad. Major shrines like the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, which housed the head of John the Baptist and a particularly venerable copy of the Qur'an in the hand of the third caliph 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, were centers for the dissemination of the religious sciences. Not surprisingly, knowledge of St. John's head and the 'Uthmānī Qur'ānic codex circulated throughout the Islamic world.

6. Shared popular beliefs in the efficacy of pilgrimage sites. The Mediterranean facilitated the exchange of popular ideas and accounts concerning the marvels of tombs and shrines. This included the development of a body of oral accounts preserved mainly in the accounts of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian travelers and pilgrims. Moreover, throughout the Mediterranean, pilgrimage places were widely regarded as healing sanctuaries. In the Islamic context, one finds expressions to the effect that a place is "tried and proven" for a particular ailment or disease or for curing barrenness. Jewish writers also commonly mentioned individuals falling ill after committing a transgression against the sanctity of a holy place and then pleading with the holy person and consequently being cured.

Concluding remarks

Finally, the documentary evidence indicates that Muslim and Jewish pilgrimage sites were part of a broader pilgrimage network of sites that linked the northern Mediterranean with the southern region and beyond. Perhaps, we may even refer to a Mediterranean sensibility that existed among pilgrims visiting holy sites revered by two or indeed by all three faiths. This suggests that pilgrimage allowed for a suspension of the prescribed roles of individuals in society and provided a new albeit temporary frame of reference through which individuals related to each other and communicated with the Divine.

References

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