Historiography in the Service of the Muftī: Ibn Taymiyya on the Origins and Fallacies of Ziyārāt

Daniella Talmon-Heller
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Beer Sheva, Israel
talmond@bgu.ac.il

Abstract

This essay demonstrates Ibn Taymiyya’s engagement of historiography in iftā’. It draws upon fatwās on pilgrimage to Ascalon, travel to shrines of al-Ḥusayn in Ascalon and Cairo, and visits to Jerusalem and Hebron. Ibn Taymiyya weaves sophisticated historical narratives into his legal reasoning against visiting tombs of prophets and Ahl al-Bayt. He exposes lacunas, contradictions and unreasonable assertions in truisms about bodies of prophets and saints and their cults. He argues against ziyāra to such sites, blaming Shiʿīs for spreading the innovation at a particularly vulnerable time for Islam. His attack on notions of the religious merits of Jerusalem and of murābaṭa hinges upon his reconstruction of the history the Dome of the Rock and of the Islamic frontier. History leads him to stress the temporality of territorial definitions and their dependence on context. His argumentation resonates in works of later writers, demonstrating the continuing relevance of his fatwās.

Keywords


Resolved to explain the full implications of the well-known prophetic ḥadīth, “lā tashuddūʾ al-riḥāl illā ilā thalātha masājid (you shall only set out for three mosques),”¹ Ibn Taymiyya (661-728/1263-1328) argues that the prohibition

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¹ On this oft-quoted ḥadīth, see Meir J. Kister, “‘You Shall Only Set Out for Three Mosques,’
applies not only to mosques, but also to other places to which Muslims may want to travel for the purpose of pious visitation. He lists sites associated with the revelation of the word of God (such as Mt. Sinai and the cave of Hira), caves and mountains connected to the lives of prophets, the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad and tombs of other prophets, and erstwhile garrison towns (thughūr). He bases this inclusive interpretation on multiple grounds: additional prophetic hadiths, Qur’ānic verses, the principle of distinguishing oneself from Jews, Christians and heretics (mukhālafat al-kitābwa-l-mushrikīn), the consensus of most legal authorities, the lack of sound hadith claiming otherwise, and the syntax of “lā tashuddū…” (i.e. al-iththnā al-mufragh; exclusion based on omission). In his polemics against setting out for the thughūr, he takes up the glasses of the historian, offering succinct presentations of the development of the Islamic empire.

Ibn Taymiyya’s strong opposition to ziyāras was far from accepted at the time, and encountered reservations not only from rank-and-file Muslims, but also from religious scholars. Many ‘ulamā’ of the Ayyubid and early Mamluk period criticized their contemporaries for improper behavior in cemeteries and mausolea, but they did not express similar objections to the visitation of graves. Some of them engaged in ziyāras, and regarded certain aspects of the practice as meritorious. Ibn Taymiyya, therefore, wrote more than 100 fatwās and treatises dedicated to polemics against the veneration of tombs and visits to shrines for an audience of learned colleagues, as much as for common practitioners. His work on those issues has drawn the attention of modern

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2 Ibid., 65, 69, 80.


scholars as well. Muhammad Memon, Christopher Taylor and Niels Olesen have studied the corpus I am addressing, focusing on Ibn Taymiyya's attack on faulty practices, and on his theological arguments: namely, that the cult of saints, and especially the visitation of graves, negates the fundamental Islamic principle of tawḥīd and contradicts the shariʿa.8 I will concentrate on Ibn Taymiyya's historical reasoning, and compare some of his arguments to those of other Mamluk scholars, better known as historians, and to those raised by present-day historians of the Middle East. Highlighting the ways in which this original thinker drew upon historical precedents and narratives in his legal reasoning in matters of religious piety, I shall argue that Ibn Taymiyya reached some bold conclusions.

“Ibn Taymiyya was little interested in history and wrote none,” writes Robert Irwin in an essay on Mamluk historiography.9 Indeed, in modern scholarship, Ibn Taymiyya is hardly ever regarded as an historian,10 even though some of his early biographers recognized his learning in this field. Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), for example, says that Ibn Taymiyya's knowledge of history and biographies was truly amazing (“wa-maʿrifatu bi-l-taʾrīkh wa-l-siyar fa-ʿajab ʿajīb”).11 To the best of my knowledge, only one modern essay is fully dedicated to Ibn Taymiyya's concern with history: Min maʿālim minhaj Ibn Taymiyya fī muʿālajat qaḍāyā al-taʾrīkh min khilāl kitābihi al-fatāwā (Ibn Taymiyya's method of dealing with historical issues in his fatwās). The author, Saʿd Mūsā al-

11 Saʿd Ibn al-Mūsā al-Mūsā, Min Maʿālim Minhaj Ibn Taʾimiyya fī Muʿālajat Qaḍāyā al-Taʾrīkh min khilāl Kitābihi al-Fatāwā (Riyad: Dār al-Qāsim, 1482/2010), 8. This phrase was used, verbatim, by several later authors. Maqrīzī uses the phrase “tabaḥḥur fiʾulūm al-taʾrīkh,” to refer to Ibn Taʾimiyya's profound knowledge of history, and al-ʿUmari claims that he was most learned in this field (min aʿraf al-nās bi-l-taʾrīkh). See Muḥammad ʿA. Shams and ‘Ali b. M. al-ʿImrān, Al-Jāmiʿ li-Sīrat Shaykh al-Islām (Mecca: Dār ʿIlm al-Fawāʾid 1422/2001-2), 318, 398.
Mūsā, lists Ibn Taymiyya’s references to historical evidence and explains his use of earlier sources and his methodology of historical investigation. Al-Mūsā also highlights Ibn Taymiyya’s interest in comparisons. He contrasts Umayyad caliphs and ‘Abbasid caliphs, the Umayyads in al-Andalus and the Fatimids, the era of the Prophet and his own times, Hulagu’s attitude towards the Muslims and Nebuchadnezzar’s attitude towards the Israelites, the quality of the works of Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī versus that of other Sufi authorities of his time.

Livnat Holtzman and Yahya Michot have noted Ibn Taymiyya’s interest in the history of religion. In his fatwā on ta‘tīl al-ṣifāt (divesting God of his attributes), for example, Ibn Taymiyya explains that this misguided idea comes from sources foreign to Islam that became available in translation to Arabic in the lifetime of Ja‘d b. Dirham and his student al-Jahm b. Šafwān (executed in 128/746). A short reference to Ibn Taymiyya’s use of historical argumentation in legal reasoning is found in Qamaruddin Khan’s book on Ibn Taymiyya’s political thought. Khan points out that Ibn Taymiyya’s objection to rebellion (baghī) is based on his reading of narratives about rebellions against rulers of the early Islamic state. Those include al-Ḥusayn’s insurrection against Yazid b. Mu‘awiya, the rebellion against ‘Abd al-Malik in Iraq, Ibn al-Muhallab’s rebellion against his father in Khurasan, Abū Muslim’s rebellion against the Umayyads in Khurasan and the rebellions against al-Manṣūr in Medina and in Basra. Based on his investigation of those cases, Ibn Taymiyya concludes that none ended well, “either for religion, or for the world,” and for this reason taking up arms against a Muslim ruler, so long as the ruler is a Muslim who prays, is not allowed. According to Khan, "by using true historical facts," Ibn Taymiyya also

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12 According to al-Mūsā, Ibn Taymiyya deals with the soundness of historical sources by investigating the reliability of their authors, their time and proximity to the events they describe, and – at least in one case – the possibility of fraudulent documentation (al-Mūsā, Minhaj, 56). Some of the authors he trusts are Ibn Sa‘d, al-Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, al-Qushayrī, Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn al-Mubārak and Ibn Ḥanbal.

13 Al-Mūsā, Minhaj, 12-17, 24-25.

14 Ibid., 49-50, 59.


16 Qamaruddin Khan, The Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya (Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1992), 167-68. In a different discussion of baghī Ibn Taymiyya accuses the alleged founder of the Ṣabā‘iyya, ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Ṣabā‘ (rather than Tālḥa and Mu‘awiya), for the rebellion that
proves that the Rāshidūn regime was the ideal Islamic polity, and that it is impossible for any ruler to surpass them.17

Zayde Antrim, who has studied another neglected aspect of Ibn Taymiyya’s work – geography – focuses on the historical circumstances under which he issued his legal opinions. Antrim argues that Ibn Taymiyya deviates from his usual position against the attribution of sanctity to places (save those explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān) and ascribed special virtues to Syria. Acutely aware of contemporary historical circumstances, especially the threat of a Mongol assault, Ibn Taymiyya had to enlist the Mamluks to defend Syria, and this need dictated, as it were, a “wartime statement of patriotism.”18

In a short essay entitled “Law and Historiography,” Nimrod Hurvitz notes that the inclusion of historical data in legal discussions is especially common in the domains of administrative and public law. He shows that jurists had agreed that the classification of land for the purpose of taxation was dependent on its mode of conquest by the Muslims (ʿunwatan – by force, or sulḥan – by agreement), and therefore jurists had to depend on the narratives of historians of the early Islamic empire.19 The fact that those narratives often disagree with each other and lack the sanctity and authority attributed to Qur’ān and hadīth, Hurvitz argues, gave jurists much-desired flexibility in the formation of their legal doctrines.

Overall, the employment of historical narratives in Islamic legal reasoning has received very little attention in modern scholarship. Its ‘reverse’ – the employment of fatwās as repositories of facts and narratives about the past – is much more current among present-day historians of Muslim societies. Despite

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17 Khan, Political Thought, 92.
well-known methodological problems, modern historians use fatwās when searching for information on topics such as economic arrangements, gender relations, familial structures, religious life, social institutions and the status of non-Muslims, as well as on worldviews, common anxieties and shared mentalities.

Returning to Ibn Taymiyya, I will begin with a short exposition of his theological arguments against aspects of saint and tomb veneration. First, he warns, such worship “is an imitation of the ways of the polytheists (mushrikūn)… and constitutes the veneration of the created (al-makhlūq) [rather than the creator].” Lingering by graves, touching and kissing tombstones and praying in cemeteries resemble polytheistic practices (al-shirk wa-ʿibādat al-awthān), and encroach upon tawḥīd (the unity of God). He also argues at length against the popular notion that supplication (duʿāʾ) is more effective if performed by tombs. He asserts that even if this appears to be the case, the fact that a Muslim’s request was granted after he had prayed by a tomb provides no

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20 Legal responsa may be purely didactic, or ‘academic’ (that is, designed to impress the reader with the rhetorical and legal acumen of the muftī), based on partial and biased information, or too general to give an idea of specific historical circumstances. On these issues see, for example, Muhammad K. Masud, Brinkley Messick, and David S. Powers, “Muftis, Fatwas and Islamic Legal Interpretation,” in Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and their Fatwas, ed. M.K. Masud, B. Messick, and D.S. Powers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 22-23; Amalia Zomeno, “The Stories in the Fatwās and the Fatwās in History,” in Narratives of Truth in Islamic Law, ed. B. Dupret, B. Drieskens, and A. Moors (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 25-49.


24 See, for example Daniella Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 47, 56, 59-60.


27 See, for example, Megan H. Reid, Law and Piety in Medieval Islam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 117 n60., 141.

evidence of an inherent connection between the two, nor to the permissibility of the practice. Using logical reasoning, he exposes the absurdity of seeking intermediaries while appealing to God: if a plea is proper and justified, intercession is unnecessary. If one pursues something improper, why expect righteous Muslims to advance the case?29

Ibn Taymiyya insists that, according to the sharīʿa, the only places that Muslims ought to seek out with the intention of prayer are mosques and sites along the pilgrimage route to Mecca (mashāʿir al-ḥajj). Deliberate travel to tombs for the purpose of visitation (ziyārat al-qubūr), prayer or invocation is reprehensible, and merits no reward. He argues against the religious merit or even permissibility of deliberate travel (safar) for the purpose of worship at other places considered holy.30 Addressing the Muslim who feels that his need has been satisfied after having uttered invocations by a hallowed tomb, Ibn Taymiyya explains that God rewards the effort involved in supplication, rather than the location in which the supplication is performed. Praying next to a cross would have had exactly the same outcome!31 Nonetheless, in some places (or at some stage of his life; unfortunately the corpus is not dated) he demonstrates an understanding of human psychology, acknowledging what Memon has called “popular belief in the spirituality of location and its efficacy,”32 and the human need of intercession by intermediaries considered close to God.33 Likewise, he is fully aware of the misguided reasoning that leads people to suppose that what seems to be effective must be licit (including the obviously forbidden sorcery, astral worship and soothsaying).34 Finally, he acknowledges that inasmuch as the sight of graves makes men mindful of death and fearful of the hereafter, grave visitation is permissible and may constitute a “ziyāra sharʿiyya.”35

Turning to historical precedents, Ibn Taymiyya examines the conduct of the rightly-guided caliphs and other Companions of the Prophet. He claims that they did not travel to the tombs of great prophets such as Abraham, to the tombs of other righteous men, or to Mt. Sinai (al-Ṭūr), “the blessed place and

29 Taylor, *Vicinity*, 175.
30 Ibid., 169-73. Ibn Taymiyya deals at length with the legal definition of travel (safar) for the sake of visiting the tombs of prophets and righteous men, and whether one may shorten obligatory prayers during such travel (his answer is negative), vow to perform such visits, or vow to visit Jerusalem (Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:7, 8, 14, 22, 184, 188, 204).
31 Ibid., 100.
34 Ibid., 97, 99-101; Taylor, *Vicinity*, 179.
the holy valley where God spoke to Moses, as mentioned in the Qur’ān [79:15].”36 He argues that even under stressful circumstances, as during a severe drought in the time of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (12-23/634-644), they did not go to visit the tomb of the Prophet to seek his intervention. Under ʿUmar’s leadership, the community turned in supplication directly and solely to God. The lesson Ibn Taymiyya draws from this historical example is supported, typically, by ḥadīths, e.g., the Prophet’s plea, “do not make my tomb an idol that is worshipped” (quoted from al-Muwaṭṭa’ of Mālik b. Anas), or “do not turn my tomb into a mosque” (quoted from the Ṣaḥīḥs of al-Bukhārī and Muslim).37

ʿUmar’s wariness of tomb worship was demonstrated again, according to Ibn Taymiyya, immediately after the conquest of Tustar, where the perfectly preserved body of the Prophet Daniel was discovered. ʿUmar ordered that the prophet be reburied by night, in one of thirteen identical graves he had instructed to dig by day. In order to eliminate the development of a cult at the site, ʿUmar commanded that all thirteen mounds should be leveled to the ground.38 Ibn Taymiyya concludes with a logical deduction: “If travel to al-Ṭūr Mountain... is not advised, how much the more so travel to other locations [i.e., less important locations, such as the tomb of Daniel in Tustar].”39

In order to assess the permissibility and religious merit of travel to frontier towns (thughūr), Ibn Taymiyya investigates the history of the Islamic frontier. His survey begins with the establishment of the first Muslim stronghold in Medina in 1/622 and ends in the second half of the fourth/tenth century, when the Muslims ruled the Hijaz, Syria and Iraq, but still struggled with the Byzantines on the sea and on the borders of Anatolia. He writes:

A place might be a frontier zone (thaghhr) at one time but not another. It might be an abode of Islam and righteousness at one time, and an abode of apostasy and infidelity at another, just as Mecca was an abode of war and apostasy when Medina became an abode of belief, a destination for migration (ḥijra), and a place for those who guard Islamic territory (ribāṭ). After its conquest, Mecca became an abode of Islam, and Medina was no longer an abode of ḥijra and ribāṭ, as it had been before the conquest... while the far ends of the Hijaz, bordering the territories of war, Syria and Iraq, became frontier zones. Once the Muslims had conquered Syria and Iraq, however, the frontier moved to the Syrian coastal plain (sawāḥil

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37 Taylor, Vicinity, 180.
38 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:97; Taylor, Vicinity, 183.
al-Shām). Ascalon and Acre and their surroundings became the thughūr of Syria, and Abadan became the thagr of Iraq. This is why early Muslim authorities mention Abadan and Ascalon so often: they were frontier towns, as was Tartus, when Muslims ruled it. Once seized by the infidels, however, the towns adjacent to the territory of the enemy around Aleppo became frontier zones instead.40

All in all, Ibn Taymiyya lists thirteen localities along the Syrian coast and inland (from north to south) – Amad, Malatyah, Jabal Lukkam, Adhana, Tarsus, Sis, Masisa, Tripoli, Mt. Lebanon, Beirut, Acre, Ascalon and Gaza. On other frontiers, he mentions Qazwin, Abadan and Alexandria.41 He claims that as long as these towns played a role in the defense of Muslim lands travel to them and sojourn in them was even more meritorious than the ḥajj, and better than sojourn in Mecca and Medina.42

Ascalon was a frontier town of the Muslims, and righteous Muslims would reside there for the sake of ribāṭ [defending Muslim territory] in the way of God. This is true also of similar places, such as Mt. Lebanon, Alexandria and Abadan, and their like in Iraq and Qazwin and other frontier zones. The righteous would go out to such places for the sake of ribāṭ in the way of God,43 according to a verified saying of the Prophet in the Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim, as transmitted by Salmān al-Fārisī. “One day and one

41 Olesen, Culte, 85, 250; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘at al-Fatāwā 27:32-35, 81-82.
night spent in *ribāṭ* in the way of God are better [viz., more meritorious] than an entire month of fasting and keeping vigil by night; whoever dies as a defender of the Muslim frontier, dies the death of the warrior of *jihād*...\(^{44}\)

The continued sanctification of such places, and religiously motivated travel to them after they have ceased functioning as [Sunni] outposts, however, should be avoided altogether, according to Ibn Taymiyya.\(^{45}\) To clarify his point, he narrates the political history of Syria, as follows:

The Syrian coast was the frontier zone of Islam [only] until the early fourth [tenth] century... at the beginning of the fourth century the caliphate was in turmoil, the treacherous Shi‘is and hypocrites (*al-rāfiḍa wa-l-*munāfiqūn*)\(^{46}\) gained power and rule in Egypt, in the Maghrib, in the eastern countries and in Syria...

Hence, according to Ibn Taymiyya, some 300 years prior to his lifetime and that of his petitioners, the Syrian *thughūr* had lost their elevated religious status. Formerly, this status had been based on the strategic value of those sites under specific historical circumstances – the threat of enemy raids from the sea, and the settlement of pious Muslim *murābiṭūn* (defenders)\(^{47}\) – rather than on any inherent characteristic of the place (*lā li-ajl khāṣṣiyyat dhālika al-makān*). Ibn Taymiyya completes his survey of the vicissitudes of the Levant with the Crusader period, adding that “afterwards the Christians conquered most of the Syrian lands... until God rejoiced in the rule of the kings of the Sunna, Nūr al-Dīn and Saladin and their like, who redeemed Syria from the Christians.”\(^{48}\)

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45 Olesen, *Culte*, 11.
48 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā*, 27: 34. Ibn Taymiyya praises Saladin for defeating the Fatimids in Egypt, and he praises Nizām al-Mulk and scholars who surrounded him for
Ibn Taymiyya insists that two parameters determine the status of territory, both of them temporal: (1) its role in the protection of Dār al-Islām and the spread of proper (i.e. Sunni) Islamic sovereignty, and (2) the status of its inhabitants (aḥwāl ahlihā) based on their religious practices (aʿmāl). Sanctity – he uses the roots ḥ.d.l, š.r.f, q.d.s and ʿ.z.m – is neither inherent to a place nor permanent.49 He reiterates this theme with regards to Mecca (see above) and the Holy Land (al-ard al-muqaddasa), which – he reminds us – was referred to as “the abode of the evil-doers (dār al-fāsiqīn)” when it was settled by the “giant people” (al-Fabbārīn, Q 5: 20-22).50 He repeats the idea that status of territory is determined by the religious practices of its inhabitants in his famous Mardin fatwa.51 “A land may be praised (yuḥmadu) or disparaged (yudhammu) at different times, depending on the status (ḥāl) of its inhabitants,” explains Ibn Taymiyya. He ends this fatwā with another aphorism attributed to Salmān al-Fārisī: “Land does not sanctify anybody, but a man is sanctified by his own deeds.” To edify his readers, he adds some historical information about his source. He claims that this aphorism is taken from Salmān’s correspondence with Abū al-Dardā’, who had become Salmān’s ‘brother’ in Medina according to the muʿākhāt (‘brotherhood’) arrangement between pairs of muhājirs and anṣār. He dates the specific letter to Salmān’s service as governor in Iraq under the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and to Abū al-Dardā’’s sojourn in Syria.52

Ibn Taymiyya continues by refuting the authenticity of shrines erected in honor of the severed head of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī in Ascalon, and later, almost 500 years after his killing, in Cairo. He asserts that it is well-known that the shrine in Ascalon was established under the rule of the fanatic and deceitful Fatimids, more than 430 (hijrī) years after the killing of al-Ḥusayn on 10 Muḥarram (al-ʿAshūrā’) 61/680 in Karbala. No scholar with integrity – neither an expert on ḥadīth, on Cairo, on history, or on genealogy (of Quraysh or of the Hāshimīs) – can claim otherwise. Here, Ibn Taymiyya

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49 Olesen, Culte, 210; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:82-83.
50 Q. 7:145. The giants who intimidated the Children of Israel and caused them to sin by refusing to enter the Holy Land correspond to the giants of Canaan (nefīlim or bnei ʿanaq in Hebrew) mentioned by the spies in the biblical narrative. See Numbers, 13:28, 33.
51 Michot, Muslims, 65.
52 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:82-83. Giorgio Levi Della Vida dismisses as unsubstantiated all information on Salmān, whom he calls a “semi-legendary figure of early Islam.” See EP, s.v. Salmān al-Fārisī (Giorgio Levi Della Vida).
expresses his poor opinion of transmitters of historical anecdotes (akhbāriyyūn) who cite any liar or ignoramus, and his preference for transmitters of hadīth who choose their informants more carefully.\footnote{Al-Qarāfī refers to historical reports as riwāyāt (al-Qarāfī, The Criterion, 205-06). Al-Subkī expresses doubt regarding the reliability of historical sources, even of eyewitnesses, by pointing to disagreements between early reports on the conquest of Damascus, but refrains from accusing anyone of intentional lying. See Hurvitz, “Law and historiography,” 368-69. Hurvitz argues that jurists were well-served by the “innate flexibility” and “softness” of historical narratives, in contrast to Prophetic traditions, which had acquired a much more authoritative status.} He casts doubt on the oft-repeated narrative about the triumphal procession from Karbala to Damascus, said to have been initiated by the governor of Kufa and commander of the Umayyad forces, ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād, after the tragic killing of al-Ḥusayn. Allegedly, the procession exhibited the hapless captives (mainly women) of Karbala, and brought the head of al-Ḥusayn, impaled on the edge of a spear, to the palace of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:212.} Even though Ibn Taymiyya refers to Karbala as a “calamity” (muṣība) and declares al-Ḥusayn a “victim of injustice and martyr,”\footnote{Yahya Michot, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Critique of Shi‘ī Imāmology: Translation of Three Sections of his Minhaj al-Sunna,” The Muslim World 114 (2014), 109-49, at 111.} he objects to the demonization of Yazīd:

Clearly, the story told about the transfer of al-Ḥusayn’s head to Yazīd and what was told about him, namely that he poked it with a stick, is a lie... There is no sound chain of transmission to support it, only a fragmented chain. According to more trustworthy reports, Yazīd expressed sorrow when he heard the news about the killing of al-Ḥusayn, and he cursed the people of Iraq... there is no basis to the claim that the head was transferred to Syria in the time of Yazīd, let alone afterwards.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:253. See also al-Mūsā, Minhaj, 34-35.}

Relying on early sources that he does consider sound, however,\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:253. See also al-Mūsā, Minhaj, 24-25.} Ibn Taymiyya suggests that the head of the martyr was sent from Karbala to Medina, where it was buried in the cemetery of al-Baqī’.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:79, 207-08. Ibn Sa’d and al-Bukhārī make the same claim. See Ibn Sa’d, al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957), 5:238. Ibn Taymiyya identifies the cemetery of al-Baqī’ and al-Qubba Mosque on the outskirts of Medina as places to which pilgrimage (safar) is prohibited, but a visit (ziyāra) is allowed, if one happens to be in Medina (Olesen, Culte, 43).} He thereby dismisses, or ignores,
variant reports: that the head was buried in Damascus after Yazīd’s death;59 returned from Damascus to Karbala and buried there with the rest of Husayn’s body;60 or taken to Najaf, Raqqqa, Aleppo, or Merv.61

A rival claim was inscribed on a wooden minbar (pulpit) commissioned by the powerful Fatimid Armenian general and vizier Badr al-Dīn al-Jamālī in 484/1091 for a newly built shrine in Ascalon. The minbar, a masterpiece of Fatimid woodwork, is extant. Its inscription – eighteen lines in Kufic script – was published and translated into French and English by several specialists, most recently by Moshe Sharon.62 It accuses “the evildoers” (al-ẓālimūn) of “hiding the head of our master (mawlānā), the imām, the martyr Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib” in a remote place, “in order to obliterate its divine light.” Its [re]discovery “in the frontier town (thaghr) of Ascalon,” (Badr al-Dīn obviously did not hold Ibn Taymiyya’s view that Ascalon ceased to be a thaghr after it was lost to Sunni Islam and came under Shi‘i rule; nor did other Fatimid authors)63 is attributed to a wonder (muʿjiz).64 It is also described as a sign (āya) of heavenly grace for the Fatimid dynasty and a special favor for the vizier. As we have seen, Ibn Taymiyya sneers at Badr al-Jamālī’s alleged discovery of the head, insisting that the relic could not have been buried there in total anonymity for 400 years and later surfaced in Shi‘i-ruled Ascalon. His dating of the Fatimid shrine, however, is strikingly close to that of Badr al-Jamālī’s inscription.


60 Josef W. Meri, The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192; EI², s.v. Salmān al-Fārisī (Giorgio Levi Della Vida).

61 EI², s.v. (al-)Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib (Laura Veccia Vaglieri).


63 See, for example, the text of a Fatimid khatba of 969 CE (the year of the conquest of Egypt by the Fatimids) in Jiwa, Shainhool, trans., Towards a Shi‘i Mediterranean Empire: Fatimid Egypt and the Founding of Cairo. The Reign of the Imam-caliph al-Mu‘izz, from al-Maqrizī’s Itḥāz al-Ḥunafā’ (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 82. The phrase “thaghr Ascalon” appears also in an account about the embellishment of the shrine of Ra’s al-Ḥusayn three decades after its construction. See Fu‘ād A. Sayyid, ed. Ṣuṣūn min Akhbār Miṣr li-Ibn al-Ma’mūn al-Batā‘īhi, Cairo: Al-Ma’had al-ʿIlmī al-Faransī li-l-Āthār al-Sharqiyya, 1983, 40. In the early twelfth century CE, the town was undeniably a frontier zone, bordering the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and constantly targeted by it.

64 On the ‘rediscovery’ of forgotten holy sites and relics, see Meri, Cult, 43-47. For other examples, see Talmon-Heller, Islamic Piety, 190-98.
In the summer of 548/1153, Fatimid Ascalon surrendered to the Franks after a seven-month siege. Retreating Muslims took the head of al-Ḥusayn from its mausoleum to a safe haven in Cairo, where a new mashhad was constructed in its honor.\(^{65}\) Al-Maqrīzī (766-845/1365-1442) preserves descriptions of the rituals that were performed at that shrine until the fall of the Fatimid dynasty some twenty years later. He mentions lamentations, ritual slaughter and banquets on the day of al-ʿAshūrāʾ; sermons, the reading of the text of ‘Abū Bakr’s designation as the Prophet’s successor, prayer, and a caliphal procession on the day of Ghadir Khumm (the anniversary of this alleged designation).\(^{66}\)

The veneration of the head of al-Ḥusayn did not end with the return of Sunni hegemony to Egypt in the 1170s. To the contrary, the mashhad became an extremely popular shrine, as depicted enthusiastically in the memoirs of the Sunni Maghrībi traveler Ibn Jubayr, who spent some time in Cairo in 1183,\(^{67}\) and in multiple later accounts (culminating, in my view, with a moving description of a visit to the shrine of Amina, the protagonist of Naguib Mahfouz’s 1956 trilogy, * Palace Walk*).\(^{68}\)

Curiously, the empty mashhad in Ascalon continued to attract visitors, despite the transfer of the relic that had sanctified it, and – four decades later – the transfer of its beautiful minbar to the sanctuary of the Patriarchs in Hebron (al-Ḥaram al-Ibrāhīmī). This is why Ibn Taymiyya attacks this cult so vehemently, using his knowledge of the past. He points to the improbability of the superior knowledge of later informants over the wisdom, or admitted uncertainty, of early informants\(^{69}\) (such as Abū Bakr b. Abī al-Dunyā, Abū al-

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\(^{69}\) This perplexing phenomenon is addressed with a touch of sarcasm by Michael Cook, who shows how historical data about the Prophet grow with the passage of time (Michael
Qāsim al-Baghawī) and of the later Abū al-Khaṭṭāb b. Dihya, who “collected all the reports on al-Ḥusayn and his killing.” Only late historians maintain the antiquity and authenticity of the tomb in Ascalon, stresses Ibn Taymiyya, while early and reliable authorities claim otherwise.70 To support this point, he likens those later informants to an impostor who pretends to be an ‘Alid sharīf (a descendant of the privileged ‘nobility’ of Islam), although it is well-known that the man’s ancestors never made such a claim, or to someone who declares that any random tomb in some Muslim town is that of al-Ḥusayn or that of a prophet.71

Similarly, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī (700-749/1301-1349), another Mamluk period scholar, articulates his skepticism with regards to the Fatimid identification of the site in Ascalon, as follows:

It is most likely that the head never left Damascus after having been sent to Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya, to the seat of his government and that of the Umayyads. It is inconceivable (min al-muḥāl) that the head, which was intentionally brought to the ruler, would have been sent away... [in addition], a long time passed between the killing of al-Ḥusayn and the construction of the shrine in Ascalon.72

Al-ʿUmarī’s preferred solution to the riddle of the whereabouts of the relic is the shrine at Bāb al-Farādīs in Damascus. Still, he also quotes the ninth-century Akhbār al-Dawla al-ʿAbbāsiyya, where it is suggested that the head was sent to Medina and buried there next to al-Ḥusayn’s brother al-Ḥasan.73 Ibn Taymiyya’s student and admirer Ibn Kathīr is even more blunt: “They [the Fatimids] brought a head and placed it at the site of the above-mentioned mosque [Tāj al-Ḥusayn in Cairo] and said: this is the head of al-Ḥusayn. And the rumor got around and people came to believe it.”74

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70 Al-Mūsā, Minhaj, 35, 55-56.
72 Text: wa-l-mudda baʿīd bayna maqtal al-Ḥusayn wa-mabnā mashhad ʿAsqalān.
Ibn Taymiyya argues (correctly, it seems) that there are no reliable early sources that claim that al-Ḥusayn’s head was ever buried in Ascalon. There is no earlier evidence whatsoever – no inscription, stone or cult – to indicate that al-Ḥusayn’s remains were, indeed, interred there. He further undermines the hypothesis of burial in Ascalon by considering the probability of this narrative within the historical context of the early Umayyad era. He makes two carefully constructed arguments: the first, against burial in Ascalon; the second, in support of burial in Medina. The transmission of al-Ḥusayn’s remains to Ascalon, argues Ibn Taymiyya, could not have served any political purpose of the Umayyads:

Even if we determine that it was indeed sent to Yazīd, what benefit would he have had from sending the head to Ascalon, at that time a garrison frontier town settled by pious Muslim defenders (murābiṭūn)? Had they [i.e., the Umayyads] wished to hide the head, Ascalon was well-known to many [hence a bad choice] ... If [one claims that] their purpose was to confer blessing upon the place, that is unreasonable, as al-Ḥusayn was his declared enemy, whose blood he had spilled! It is evident that arranging for al-Ḥusayn to be buried next to his mother and brother in the cemetery of Medina was best for him [i.e., Yazīd].

As further evidence in favor of the claim that the head was buried in Medina, Ibn Taymiyya recalls a similar case: that of the burial of the brutalized body of ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, whom the Umayyads killed a decade or so after the killing of al-Ḥusayn. In that case, with the termination of the great civil war (fitna) in 73/692, the Umayyad governor al-Ḥajjāj sent the body of his nemesis to his mother for burial.

In another discussion of the whereabouts of the head of al-Ḥusayn, the historian al-Nuwayrī (677-733/1279-1333) also reaches the conclusion that its interment in Ascalon is improbable. According to his understanding, in 61/680 Yazīd would have chosen to send the severed head of his defeated enemy to

75 The earliest narrative source known to me that claims that the head of al-Ḥusayn was buried in Ascalon postdates its ‘discovery’ by Badr al-Jamālī by several decades. See Muḥammad b. ’Ali Ibn al-ʿImrānī (d. ca. 580/1184-85), Al-Inbāʾ fī Taʾrīkh al-Khulafāʾ, ed. Qāsim Al-Samarrai (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 54. Ibn al-ʿImrānī claims that Yazīd allowed men from Ascalon to take the head with them and that they built a mashhad in its honor. On the history of the shrine from the eleventh to the twenty-first century, see Talmon-Heller, Kedar and Reiter, “Vicissitudes,” 182-215.


77 Ibid., 253.

78 Olesen, Culte, 229; Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:253.
Shi‘i communities, in order to induce depression and despair amongst them, rather than to Syria or Egypt, where there were no Shi‘is.\footnote{Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-Wāhḥāb Al-Nuwayrī, Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab, ed. Muḥammad R. Fath Allāh and Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā, 33 vols. (Cairo: al-Hay‘a al-Miṣriyya li’l-Kitāb, 1975), 204:78-81.} Al-Nuwayrī’s contemporary, al-Dhahābī, was prepared to acknowledge his ignorance of the final resting place of al-Ḥusayn’s head. He quotes earlier sources that relate that when the ‘Abbasids came to Damascus after the successful overthrow of the Umayyads, they inquired about the burial place of al-Ḥusayn’s head, took it out and desecrated it. “God alone knows what happened to it afterwards,” says al-Dhahābī.\footnote{Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahābī, Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalā’, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnaʿūṭ et al., 25 vols. (Beirut: Mu’asasat al-Risāla, 1981), 33:19.}

Ibn Taymiyya was certain that the head was not buried in Ascalon. At some point in his fatwā against the authenticity of the relic of Ascalon, he digresses to discuss the history of the veneration of shrines (mashāhid). He dates the spread of this unwarranted innovation (bid‘a) to the era of the weakening of the ‘Abbasid caliphate. His terminus a quo for its emergence postdates the third generation of Muslims (tābi‘ al-tābi‘ūn), as he finds it unthinkable that Muslims would engage in saint veneration when Islam was at the height of its power and vigor. At that time, nobody erected shrines in honor of prophets, Companions, or members of the Ahl al-Bayt. Nor did they build mausolea to commemorate any righteous Muslim in any of the provinces of the empire. This claim, of course, is consistent with Ibn Taymiyya’s oft-repeated appraisal of the first three generations, the salaf, as superior in their understanding of the true message of the Prophet, and therefore as authoritative for generations to come.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘at al-Fatāwā, 27:30-13; Rapoport and Shahab, Ibn Taymiyya, introduction.} Under the ‘Abbasids, however, shrines such as the shrine in Karbala appeared in Iraq, despite juristic condemnation. The construction of shrines became normative to the degree that people thought that the attack initiated by the caliph al-Muṭṭadīk (d. 247/861) on Mashhad al-Ḥusayn in Karbala was wrong.\footnote{Ibn Taymiyya, Majmū‘at al-Fatāwā, 27:245.} Shortly afterwards, during the reign of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-932), Ibn Taymiyya tells us, the umma became divided,\footnote{The authors of a volume on the caliphate of al-Muqtadir seem to agree, acknowledging that al-Muqtadir’s reign is held “with some justice” to have been disastrous for the ‘Abbasid caliphate. See Maaike N. Van Berkel, N. El Chaikh, H. Kennedy, and L. Osti, Crisis and Continuity at the ‘Abbasid Court (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 215-19.} and heretics and ‘innovators’ multiplied. The Shi‘i dynasties of the Qarmatis, Fatimids and Buyids appeared, and seeking to change the religion of Islam (tabdīl dīn al-Islām) they
established a number of deplorable rites, veneration of tombs being a case in point. This process, according to Ibn Taymiyya’s analysis, was accompanied by the fabrication of *ḥadīth* in favor of the visitation of shrines and tombs.⁸⁴ Hence, he warns, every *ḥadīth* in favor of tomb visitation should be regarded as forged.⁸⁵ He also points to a book entitled *Manāsik Ḥajj al-Mashāhid*, allegedly written by the Fatimid Qāḍī Ibn al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974), as proof of the scandalous Fatimid preference for tomb visitation over pilgrimage to Mecca.⁸⁶ Ibn Taymiyya’s chronology is not unreasonable: according to the assessment of modern historians of the Shi’a, Shi’i scholars began to extol the merits of pilgrimage and to explicitly privilege the visit to al-Ḥusayn’s grave (at Karbala) in the tenth century CE. They base this periodization on the appearance of compilations such as *Kāmil al-Ziyārat* by Ibn Qūlawayh (d. 367/978-9), *Kitāb al-Mazār* by Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) and *Kitāb al-Kāfī* by al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941).⁸⁷

From the Shi‘i perspective, tomb visitation, especially the visitation of the tombs of imāms and other members of the ‘Alid family, is indeed an accepted and even encouraged practice.⁸⁸ Consequently, the majority of Shi‘i legal scholars have voiced no objection to the construction of mausolea and tomb-mosques. A favorable opinion on this issue was attributed to the Prophet in various statements, such as that comparing the erection of mausolea to participation in the construction of Jerusalem by Solomon.⁸⁹

Several modern historians have addressed the historicity of the claim that the Shi‘is, in general, and the Fatimids, in particular, played a pivotal role in the genesis and elaboration of monumental commemorative architecture in the Islamic world – in other words, in the erection of mausolea for saint worship. These include Oleg Grabar, Thomas Leisten, Jonathan Bloom, Caroline Williams and Christopher Taylor. Contemporary Egyptian intellectuals attribute the *mawālid* (*mūlid*, in colloquial Arabic) to the Fatimids, or to ‘Pharaonic

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⁸⁵ Ibid., 69.


⁸⁹ Ibid., 248-49.
times.90 While the question of whether Ibn Taymiyya’s understanding of the history of tomb veneration in Islam is correct is beside the point, it is interesting to note that almost 700 years after his death the debate is still alive.91

Ibn Taymiyya, as we have seen, blames the Fatimids – whom he calls Qarmatis, heretics, hypocrites, people of ignorance and innovators (Qaramita, zanādidqa, munāfiqūn, ahl al-jahl, al-mubtadiʿūn) – for introducing the innovation (bidʿa) of tomb veneration to Islam. He also discredits the Fatimids for having falsified their genealogy: although they claim descent from Fāṭima, they are, in fact, the progeny of Zoroastrians (al-Majūs) or Jews.92 Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya blames a Jewish heretic (zindiq) for instigating the Shiʿi schism (comparing his role to that of Paul in Christianity!).93 In a fatwā on the confiscation of churches, Ibn Taymiyya insists that the Fatimids falsified their ancestry, exposes their cooperation with the Franks during the Crusades, and blames them for the employment of treacherous Jewish and Christian viziers. He also brings up, unavoidably, the story of Ibn al-ʿAlqami, the Shiʿi vizier who allegedly betrayed the ʿAbbasid caliph and the Sunni Muslims of Baghdad during the Mongol assault of 1258, thereby contributing to the downfall of the ʿAbbasid dynasty. At the end of that digression, Ibn Taymiyya lists the Shiʿi errors in theology and religious practice, concluding that they “are the worst people among those who follow the [correct] direction of prayer.”94

Regarding the Cairene mashhad, Ibn Taymiyya quotes known scholars such as Ibn Diḥya, Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd, Ibn Khalaf al-Dumyāṭī, Ibn al-Qasṭalānī, al-

92 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:81. See also Michot, “Critique,” 114-15, 122-25 (on the genealogy and history of the Fatimids and Sunni religious scholarship, respectively).
93 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:75.
Qurṭūbī (the Qurʾān commentator) and ‘Abd al-ʿAzīz al-Dirīnī, saying that it was built by the Fatimids to house the relic taken from Ascalon, when its defenders surrendered to the Crusaders in 1153. Ibn Taymiyya explains that the lie about the so-called head of al-Ḥusayn became deeply entrenched under the Fatimids, as it was not advisable to speak up and state the truth. Moreover, he suspects that even his contemporaries, who know the truth regarding the shrines of the head of al-Ḥusayn, hardly dare voice it, fearing the reaction of commoners.

Here Ibn Taymiyya inadvertently raises another issue that intrigues modern historians: What was the impact of Fatimid Ismaʿili rule on non-Ismaʿili Egyptian society at the time, and for generations to come? Ibn Taymiyya claims that 200 years of Fatimid rule had a deep and continuous influence on the beliefs and practices of the inhabitants of Egypt. Fatimid subjects had absorbed the false propaganda of the ‘Qarmati Bāṭiniyya’ (i.e. the Ismaʿilis) to such an extent that it could not be uprooted by the return of Sunni hegemony with the establishment of Zangid and Ayyubid rule and the settlement of Sunnis in those lands. Due to the swift disintegration of Fatimid rule after Saladin assumed power in Egypt in 1172, present-day scholars and textbooks usually claim otherwise. However, Yaacov Lev and Devin Stewart argue, very much like Ibn Taymiyya, that Shiʿi customs and Fatimid traditions have been preserved on a popular level, and left their mark on Egyptian popular culture.

To further ridicule the veneration at the shrine of Ra’s al-Ḥusayn in Cairo, Ibn Taymiyya quotes “some Christians,” who, rejoicing at the foolishness of ignorant Muslims, compare the Christian pair “al-Sayyid al-Masīḥ wa-l-Sayyida Maryam” and the Muslim pair “al-Sayyid al-Ḥusayn wa-l-Sayyida Nafīsa.” Nafīsa bint Ḥasan b. Zayd (d. 208/824-5) was ʿAlī’s great-granddaughter and the daughter-in-law of the sixth Shiʿi imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq; she was probably the

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96 Text: ”fa-zaraʿū fīhim min akhlāq al-zanādiqa ... mā lam yunkirūna ṣiḥḥat dīn al-Islām, bal yaqulūna: hādhā ṭarīq ilā Allāh wa-hādhā ṭarīq ilā Allāh.”
98 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:243-44. Here Ibn Taymiyya engages in sophisticated polemics against Christians and against misinformed converts from Christianity to Islam, whom he calls ‘munāfiqūn,’ because they regard the two religions as equally true: “fa-inna ‘uqalālakum la yunkirīna šīḥat dīn al-Islām, bal yaqulūna: hādhā ṭarīq ilā Allāh wa-hādhā ṭarīq ilā Allāh.”
first ‘Alid to be buried in Egypt. Her mausoleum in Cairo was established shortly after her death and it was restored by Badr al-Jamālī in the summer of 482/1089 (two years after the establishment of the Ḥusaynī mausoleum in Ascalon). It became a popular pilgrimage site, as suggested by the following question, forwarded to Ibn Taymiyya: “May one recite by her tombstone, ‘Sayyida Nafīsa redeems the prisoner and protects the fearful, and [she is] the gate of needs to God?”99

When Ibn Taymiyya raises the provocative possibility that the hallowed head was actually that of a Christian,100 his conjecture resonates with a remote chapter in the history of saint veneration in Ascalon, though it is unlikely that he was aware of it. In the Byzantine period, the hill upon which the Fatimid mausoleum would later be established was known as the burial place of three Egyptian Christian martyrs who, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, were beheaded before the gates of Ascalon during the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperor Diocletian in 308 CE.101 The site is mentioned in the itinerary of a sixth-century Christian pilgrim, and depicted in the famous late sixth-early seventh-century mosaic map of Madaba in Transjordan.102

According to Ibn Taymiyya’s conjecture, there were Christian antecedents to the cult of Abraham (Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl) in Hebron too. He refers specifically to Sufi rituals (known as al-nawba al-Khalīliyya) accompanied by a reed flute (shabāba) that were held next to the mosque there. He writes: “[I]t was either an innovation of the Christians, who also penetrated the sealed chamber of Abraham, to which nobody could enter, or an innovation of ignorant Muslims.”103

At this point (as in many other places in this text), he cites the prophetic ḥadīth invoking the wrath of God on the Jews and Christians, based on the ahistoric


100 Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 242.


generic accusation that they “had turned the graves of their prophets into places of prayer.”104

Ironically, the only prophet whose site of burial is known with certainty, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is “our Prophet” (nabiyyinā) Muḥammad.105 The identification of other tombs – he lists those of a number of prophets and Companions, including Muhammad’s wives and daughters – is based on unreliable sources: stories (ḥikāyāt) about dreams, wonders, the smell of perfume, or some other sign.106 He not only acknowledges that the Prophet’s place of burial is known beyond doubt, but also recognizes that travel to his tomb is commendable according to the consensus of the scholars.107 He even concedes that celebrants of his birthday (mawlid), and people who offer supplications at his grave out of sincere conviction, are performing a pious act and deserve a reward.108 By contrast, he ridicules people who, like the Scripturaries, turn sites into shrines because they dreamed that the Prophet prayed there, or heard such a dream from someone else; worse yet – they made up stories about footprints of prophets and the like.109

But does Ibn Taymiyya ascribe importance to the correct identification of tombs? Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229) obviously did, thereby justifying the composition of his renowned geographical lexicon. Citing Q. 6: 11 (“Journey through the land and behold”) and a saying attributed to ʽĪsā (“the world is a place of visitation and an abode of transition. Be you then travelers in it, and take warning from what remains of the traces of the early ones”), Yāqūt asserts that all men should know the “times and stations (mawāqīt) of pilgrims and visitors, the domiciles of the Companions and Followers, the tomb-shrines of

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105 Olesen, Culte, 213; Taylor, Vicinity, 177.

106 See, for example, Ibn Taymiyya, Majmūʿat al-Fatāwā, 27:38, 96-97, 235, 241.

107 Ibid., 114.


the saints and the pious.”

Although Ibn Taymiyya had devoted considerable effort to disproving the authenticity of various sites, prominent among them the *mashhads* in honor of the head of al-Ḥusayn, he writes:

> Knowing the exact location of prophets' tombs has no religious benefit (*fāʾida sharʿiyya*), and guarding [viz., remembering] them is not a religious commandment... If one desires to pray for the prophets, salute them, believe in them and preserve their memory, that is possible even if one does not know where their tombs are, peace be upon them.

Finally, at the end of Ibn Taymiyya's long inquiry into the history of the relic known as the head of al-Ḥusayn, he returns to the field of religious law and concludes: “Whether it [i.e. the attribution of the tomb] is true or false, the establishment of mosques [and prayer] over tombs is non-Islamic and prohibited by the words of the Prophet and the consensus of the scholars ....”

Another example of the importance Ibn Taymiyya attributes to historical circumstances – his argumentation against the excessive glorification and adoration (*taʿẓīm*) of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Ṣakhra*) – also foreshadows a modern historiographical and political debate. In this case Ibn Taymiyya formulated a position that is rejected by most Muslims who participate in the current controversy over worship on the Ḥaram. He stresses that the Rock became a Muslim place of prayer only after the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān assumed power in Syria [in 685 CE]. During his struggle against Ibn al-Zubayr, ‘Abd al-Malik built the dome over the Rock in order to encourage people to travel to Jerusalem rather than to Mecca, then held by his adversary. Ibn Taymiyya does not disclose his sources here. In modern historiography, this explanation for the construction of the Dome of the Rock is most often quoted from the pro-Shiʿi anti-Umayyad geographer and historian al-Yaʿqūbī (d. 284/897), but Ibn Taymiyya may have read it in other early sources, or perhaps, in works by his contemporaries. Insisting that the Companions and Followers did not glorify the Rock and abstained from prayer there, Ibn Taymiyya...

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112 Ibid., 256-57.
yya constructs a legal argument, in addition to argumentation based on historical reasoning. He explains that, for Muslims, the Rock is the abrogated direction of prayer (qibla mansūkha),115 “just as Saturday, which is a holiday in the Shari'a of Moses, was abrogated by the Shari'a of Muḥammad and replaced with Friday.” Muslims should not engage in the cult of the Rock, just as they should not perform special worship on Saturday and Sunday, as Jews and Christians do.116 Here, as in many other cases, Ibn Taymiyya uses the principle of mukhālafa – differentiating oneself from non-Muslims and heretics, articulated also as lā tashabbahū (do not resemble). Although he certainly accepts the Prophetic hadīth that privileges Jerusalem as the third most holy place in Islam (i.e. “lā tashuddū al-riḥāl...”), as we have seen above, he struggles against contemporaneous veneration of the city in a manner that threatened, in his view, the unique status of Mecca and the ḥajj.117

Ibn Taymiyya was put on trial for his controversial interdiction of the popular practice of visitation (ziyāra) and imprisoned in Damascus in 726/1326.118 He died two years later. His multi-disciplinary attack on the veneration of tombs and sacred places was a total failure. Yet, his argumentation seems to have resonated in later works, Mamluk and modern, including, for example, Itḥāf al-Akhiṣṣa bi-Faḍāʾīl al-Masjid al-Aqṣā by Muḥammad Shams al-Dīn al-

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118 For details, see Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle, 82-85; Olesen, Culte, 15-16. This was Ibn Taymiyya’s third trial; earlier he was taken to court for supporting a literal interpretation of the attributes of God, and for undermining the power of legal oaths. See Johansen, “Perfect law,” 263-64. On the claim that Ibn Taymiyya’s position on ziyāra was misunderstood, to his detriment, or used as a pretext for his arrest, see Yahya Michot, “For a Grave in Damascus... Reflections on the funeral, and the present state of the tomb, of Ibn Taymiyya in Damascus,” 7. http://www.interfacepublications.com/~interfa3/images/pdf/Ibn-Taymiyya_Tomb.pdf
Asyūṭī (d. 880/1475), which is devoted to the sanctity of Syria and its shrines and revered sites. The author dismisses traditions in which Ascalon is referred to by beautiful titles such as ‘the bride of Syria’ and ‘the bride of Paradise’, and those that accord it a role in eschatology. Without hesitation, he brushes aside traditions that depict the Prophet as praying in the cemetery of Ascalon, or promise rewards for settlement in that town. He cites “one of the scholars, who explained that the reason [for the spread of such traditions] is that Ascalon used to be a frightening frontier town and ribāṭ that was attacked repeatedly by the enemy, causing many Muslims to sacrifice their lives and achieve martyrdom there. But now,” he concludes, “when an attack [on Ascalon] by the enemy is unlikely to occur, settlement in other garrison towns is much more meritorious.”

Although al-Asyūṭī does not identify the scholars to whom he refers, he certainly reiterates Ibn Taymiyya’s arguments, his critical approach to sources, and his awareness and thorough knowledge of historical context. Echoing Ibn Taymiyya’s argument against the continuous and uncritical definition of residence in Ascalon as murābaṭa, al-Asyūṭī argues against considering residence in Homs as a similarly pious deed. Citing the Mamluk historian al-Dhahabi, who reminded his readers that Homs was a dangerous place in the first century AH, when the plague struck Syria, he adds the following surprising comment: “But in our times [i.e. the eighth/fourteenth century] … more women die there of childbirth [than of causes related to jihād or murābaṭa].”

In his fatwās on travel to memoria and mausolea in honor of saintly men and to Jerusalem and erstwhile garrison towns, Ibn Taymiyya draws upon selected Qur’ānic verses, hadīths, the (alleged) consensus of early authorities, the opinions of great legal scholars, theological dicta, linguistics and rational deduction. I have argued here that, less conventionally, his argumentation also draws upon his understanding of historical processes that shaped the Islamic state from its inception and until his own times. Ibn Taymiyya’s sensitivity to historical context led him to the striking assertion that heightened religious merit (or: sanctity) of space may be temporary and relative, rather than divinely ordained for eternity. Arguably, he may be implying that religious devotions should change in response to changing circumstances.

120 Ibid., 35.