

Book Review

Daniella Talmon-Heller. *Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East: A Historical Perspective*. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), x + 279 pp, 28 illustrations, 1 map, index. ISBN 978-14-7446-096-5. Price: \$105.00 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

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Over the last two decades, Daniella Talmon-Heller has published widely on religion and social practices in the medieval Islamic world. Recently, she edited a remarkable volume that sought to integrate material and textual evidence for the study of the medieval and modern Middle East.¹ The book under review inaugurates a new theme. At the intersection of history, anthropology, and religion, *Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East* examines the dual issues of sacred place and sacred time while surveying the development of rites associated with them. The book is divided into two parts. The first part studies the sanctification of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, Muḥammad's grandson and 'Alī's second son, through the construc-

tion of two shrines, in Ascalon and in Cairo, that purportedly hold the head of the martyr. The second part investigates the month of Rajab, the seventh month of the Islamic calendar, whose sanctity, both acknowledged and disputed by generations of scholars, was characterized by truces, pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Mecca, ritual slaughter, fasting, prayers, and supplications. The geographical scope of the book is for the most part restricted to Egypt and Palestine; the period considered extends from Fatimid Ismā'īlī rule (358–567/969–1171) to the Mamluks (548–923/1250–1517).

The author convincingly demonstrates how the shrines of al-Ḥusayn and the month of Rajab were venerated, how the rites performed in public were promoted

1. See Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146–1260)*, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Daniella Talmon-Heller and Katia Cytryn-Silverman, eds., *Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East*, Islamic History and Civilization 108 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

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by rulers, and, most importantly, how old beliefs and practices were adjusted to fit changing historical circumstances. Talmon-Heller draws on a large variety of narrative sources, both Sunni and Shi'i, and frequently combines them with material ones. Authors such as Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. between 465/1072 and 471/1078), al-Bīrūnī (d. ca. 440/1050), Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), to name but a few, provide a broad spectrum of travelogue, historical, and legal literature. In a detailed historiographical discussion ("The State of the Art"), Talmon-Heller offers a survey of modern scholarship, especially on sacred spaces. She notes the relative scarcity of works on time; most such works, according to her, deal primarily with scientific computation of the hijri calendar rather than with calendars as cultural artifacts (p. 19).

This discrepancy is also reflected in the book's structure, which raises a few issues. While its two parts are roughly of the same length, the first contains eleven chapters, five of them excursuses, whereas the second consists of seven chapters and three excursuses. As the author explains, the excursuses aim to "supplement the narrative of each part of the book, digressing from the main plotlines in order to elaborate on a number of themes" (p. 6). Yet, given their similarities, two excursuses could have been merged with the preceding chapters (chaps. 4–5 and 6–7). Two others merely list treatises in praise of Ascalon and the sacred months

in Islam without building on what might have constituted a solid working basis for a more substantial discussion (chaps. 9 and 20). Finally, an excursus on Saladin and al-Ḥusayn in Palestinian folklore teleports the reader from medieval times to the twentieth century but contributes little to the general discussion (chap. 11). Inevitably, this organization creates a serious imbalance between the two parts, which is exacerbated by the eight excursuses.

With regard to content, the book's epistemological framework is well defined and particularly welcome in an often theory-poor field. For the reasons explained above, the emphasis here is exclusively on sacred spaces. Talmon-Heller considers what a sacred space is and what can be inferred from its geographical location. In response to the first question, she offers an overview of Mircea Eliade's concept of *axis mundi*: "Every microcosm, every inhabited region has a center, that is to say, a place that is sacred above all," says Eliade, and this place symbolizes the connection between heaven and earth or the higher and lower realms.² Talmon-Heller then turns to the second question and discusses Victor Turner's theoretical model of pilgrimage, commonly referred to as "the center out there." Turner noticed the remoteness and distinctness of many popular pilgrimage sites from socio-political centers.³ Finally, Talmon-Heller presents and largely adopts Erik Cohen's continuum approach between Eliade's and Turner's centers, which throws new

2. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961), 39–51.

3. Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal," *History of Religions* 12, no. 3 (1973): 191–230.

light on the anthropological study of pilgrimage.⁴ Succinctly, according to Cohen, pilgrimage sites are either “formal” or “popular” centers, and several criteria determine where they are to be placed on the spectrum. In Talmon-Heller’s words, these criteria are

the observance of formal Islamic devotions vs. the use of relics and ritual objects; sponsorship by the political or religious establishment vs. initiatives “from below”; and the availability (vs. absence) of entertainment and commerce at or near the site. The “excessive” presence of women was often regarded—especially by men of religion, and sometimes also by ruling authorities—to indicate a deviation from proper and “serious” religious activity (p. 11).

In the case of al-Ḥusayn’s shrine, the pilgrimage site is initially a popular center, then eventually becomes a formal one.

Talmon-Heller argues that the shrine where al-Ḥusayn’s head was buried in Ascalon was possibly a burial place of decapitated Christian martyrs in the early fourth century CE (p. 62). Little is known about Ascalon between the fourth and eleventh centuries CE; churches were built and destroyed, and a mosque was constructed in 155/771–72. More than three centuries later, in 484/1091, the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamālī (d. 487/1094) commissioned a long inscription on a *minbar* found among the ruins in Ascalon that commemorates the discovery of al-Ḥusayn’s head (p. 46). Apart from this source, the evidence associating

al-Ḥusayn’s head with Ascalon postdates the Fatimid-era inscription. Talmon-Heller acknowledges this lack of evidence. What is also lacking from her audacious and fascinating history in the *longue durée* is twofold: on the one hand, there is no historicization of al-Ḥusayn’s memory; on the other, there is no attempt to make sense of any of the twelve sites the book identifies that commemorate the voyage of the head throughout the Middle East. Both of the ignored phenomena are connected to the Battle of Karbalā’ and, more specifically, with the shaping of the memory of this tragic episode.

In an article on the memorialization of Karbalā’, Antoine Borrut demonstrated that this episode, which was “often reduced, in fact, to a police operation directed against a rebel refusing to acknowledge caliphal authority,” was remembered differently under the Umayyads and the Abbasids. During the reign of the former, historical information circulated primarily in Medina and Kufa, where the ‘Alids’ memories were preserved. The traumatic memory of the defeat and assassination of the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad was subjected to caliphal repression of the ‘Alids, while pro-Umayyad discourses favored strategies to silence the episode or deflect blame onto local actors. During the reign of the Abbasids, the ‘Alids became the victims and martyrs in whose name the Abbasids were “seeking vengeance and legitimacy” and whose memory was to be gradually revived. The redemption of ‘Alid memory, as recalled by Borrut, seems to have followed the paradigm suggested by Stephen Humphreys: covenant, betrayal,

4. Erik Cohen, “Pilgrimage Centers: Concentric and Excentric,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 19, no. 1 (1992): 33–50.

and redemption. Thus, “the redemption process starts early, chiefly with the *Tawwābūn*, but is not complete until Ḥusaynid memory has been redeemed in ‘Abbāsī sources,” after nearly two centuries.⁵

To return to the book under review, it seems clear that a shrine visited by Sunnis and Shi‘is alike must commemorate something meaningful for both. The history of the process leading to this shared practice is missing from the book.⁶ Similarly, with respect to the numerous shrines commemorating the voyage of al-Ḥusayn’s head, one wonders to what extent these sacred places, which are *de facto* sites of memory, are part of the long process of redemption and of the sacred geography contributing to Ascalon’s prestige.

In the second part of the book, the author examines the month of Rajab, the rites associated with it, and their evolution between the first/seventh and ninth/fifteenth centuries. Celebrated in Arabia before the rise of Islam, Rajab was connected to the springtime festivities of the peninsula and the ban on warfare. Although it goes beyond the scope of the present work, this phenomenon is somewhat reminiscent of the “peace and truce of God” (*Pax et treuga Dei*) in

Europe during the Middle Ages, a topic that has generated a rich scholarship.⁷ A comparison of the two environments (and other non-Western contexts) remains to be done. For several generations, Talmon-Heller argues, the Rajab visitation of Mecca was an individual practice. In the fourth/tenth century under the Fatimids, however, it became a formal public commemoration in Egypt and northern Syria. The Fridays of the month were marked by special sermons given in the presence of the ruler (p. 155). From this point onward, Rajab took on a new dimension. A new communal devotion, the prayer of great rewards (*ṣalāt al-raghā’ib*), surfaced in Jerusalem around the fifth/eleventh century (p. 183). The Mamluk sultan Baybars (d. 676/1277) incorporated the procession of the *kiswa* and the *maḥmal* into the annual caravan that left Cairo for Mecca in Rajab 661/1263 (p. 206). Liturgical texts were produced to frame religious practices during Rajab. As in the case of al-Ḥusayn’s shrines, some medieval scholars—exclusively Sunnis—argued against the sanctity of Rajab; in this specific case, they pointed out the absence of evidence designating certain days as “special.” Besides the very descriptive approach of this second part, its main weakness lies in its disconnection from

5. Antoine Borrut, “Remembering Karbalā’: The Construction of an Early Islamic Site of Memory,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 42 (2015): 249–282 (quotations from pp. 249, 269, 271); R. Stephen Humphreys, “Qur’ānic Myth and Narrative Structure in Early Islamic Historiography,” in *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, ed. Frank M. Clover and R. Stephen Humphreys (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 271–90.

6. On the same topic, see Stephennie Mulder, *The Shrines of the ‘Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi‘is and the Architecture of Coexistence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), chap. 2.

7. See Hartmut Hoffmann, *Gottesfriede und Treuga Dei*, *Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica* 20 (Stuttgart: A. Hiersemann, 1964); Thomas Head and Richard Landes, *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); Dominique Barthélemy, *L’an mil et la paix de Dieu: La France chrétienne et féodale, 980–1060* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

the first one. Indeed, visiting al-Ḥusayn's shrines in Rajab confers no additional merit. The Karbalā' episode, for instance, offers the opportunity of studying the case of Muḥarram, which is, like Rajab, one of the four sacred months of the Islamic calendar. The month of Ramaḍān could also have been an excellent choice.

Yet this potential weakness is also, paradoxically, a strength insofar as the reader can read one part or the other without losing the common thread of the book. In the "Final Comment" (i.e., general conclusion), Talmon-Heller points out that sacred place and time both aim to promote and develop humans' sanctity

through rites. This element is what links the two parts of the book. On another level, the author identifies new avenues of research to be studied: on the one hand, the social dimension of festivities associated with sacred space and time creates numerous opportunities for philanthropy; on the other, large-scale patronage by rulers and members of the elite redefines the contours of local identities.

This book contributes another element to the field of sanctity in Islam alongside the contributions of Arezou Azad (2013), Yaron Friedmann (2013), Harry Munt (2014), and Stephennie Mulder (2014).⁸

8. Arezou Azad, *Sacred Landscape in Medieval Afghanistan: Revisiting the "Faḍā'il-i Balkh"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Yaron Friedmann, "'Kūfa Is Better': The Sanctity of Kūfa in Early Islam and Shī'ism in Particular," *Le Muséon* 126, no. 1-2 (2013): 203-37; Harry Munt, *The Holy City of Medina: Sacred Space in Early Islamic Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Mulder, *Shrines of the 'Alids*.