

Vandalization of the tomb of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din

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Abstract

Sheikh Shihab ed-Din lived during the Ayyubid period (1187-1250 A.D.). When he died, followed by his two sons, the three of them were buried close to each other at a site known by Saffa residents as ed-Deir and/or Shihab ed-Din. The sacred place of the Sheikh, now recognized as an archaeological site, covers an area of about 1,700 square meters encompassing the shrine itself, a Late Islamic cemetery, a Byzantine wine-press, three cisterns, a Byzantine monastery, and remains of other ancient walls from different periods. The majority of the people of Saffa, along with and some residents of the larger Ramallah province, believe that the Sheikh enjoys a distinguished charisma from God. Therefore, until the mid-1980s the sacred place of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din was a center of attention for many people of Saffa and the surrounding villages, in order to gain the blessing of the Sheikh and obtain the benefits of his supernatural power. Despite this distinctive respect given to the personality of the Sheikh and his sacred place over the past centuries, in 2015 an as-yet unknown group vandalized the shrine and completely disrupted and destroyed the graves of the Sheikh and his two sons.

Keywords: Heritage destruction, Sheikh Shihab ed-Din, sacred places, robbery of shrines

1. Introduction

Many Muslim shrines—regardless of their historical value and importance, their size, location, or their local, national or international prominence (or lack thereof)—have been subjected to attacks and serious destruction (Mayar and Damrel, 2013). Throughout the past three centuries, a large number of shrines of Muslim saints have been destroyed, some of them leveled to the ground (Beranek and Tupek, 2009: p.3). Between 1803 and 1806, the Wahabi army destroyed highly respected sacred places in Mecca and Medina, such as the graves of the Martyrs of the Battle of Uhud and the mosque at the grave of Hamza ibn Abdul Muttalib (Al-Alawi, 2006). In 1925, all shrines that had been constructed during the Ottoman period over the graves of highly respected Muslim figures in Al-Muallah cemetery, Mecca, were demolished (The Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies, 2015: p.6).

In 1994 in Aden, the shrine of Sheikh abu Bakr ibn Abdallah al-Aydarus was seriously damaged, a public act carried out by hundreds of men armed with heavy equipment (a bulldozer), rocket-propelled grenades and other tools (Engseng, 2006: pp.5-7; Beranek and Tupek, 2009: p.3). In 1998, the grave of Amna bint Wahb, the mother of the Prophet Muhammad, located in al-Abwa' village/Saudi Arabia, was demolished. In 2002, the tomb of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in Medina was destroyed and flattened to the ground (Al-Alawi, 2006). Aoude reported that immediately after the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in Libya (February 2011), several historical and sacred places of Muslim saints were either partially or totally vandalized and/or demolished by Salafi groups, with the skeletal remains of some of the interred removed to unknown places.

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For example: the graves of Abdul-Rahman Al-Masri and Salem abu Seif (Muslim scholars) located in the town of Sidi Masri, were vandalized and their skeletal remains removed from their original places; the shrine of Zuhayr ibn Qais Al-Balawi in Derna was demolished by a bomb; and the shrine of Ahmad Zarruq (a Muslim scholar) was first vandalized, then the skeletal remains of the Sheikh removed from their original place, and finally the shrine completely destroyed through the use of bulldozers and explosive materials (Aoude, n.d.). Other examples of shrines destroyed during the Arab Spring are: Sheikh Zowad, Sheikh Hamid abu Jarin, and Sheikh Salim Al-Sharif abu Jarir, all in Egypt; Sidi Bou Said, Sidi Abdeljabar and Sidi Amor Bouzid in Tunisia; Sakina bint Ali, Roqayyah bint Al-Hussein, Sayeda Zeinab bint Ali and Sheikh Mohammad Hassoun in Syria; Sheikh Ali Tairi, Sheikh Mohiyi Al-Din and Sheikh Mohammad Bimalo in Somalia (The Muslim500, 2016); and finally, Ali ibn Al-Athir Al-Jazari and Imam Awn Al-Din in Iraq (MacEoin, 2014).

It is believed that the demolishing of the raised graves and sacred compounds of saints is rooted in certain Islamic prophetic traditions (*hadith*), in the practice of some caliphs, in legal opinions (*fatwas*) issued by some Muslim scholars and official authorities, and also in the growing influence of *takfir* ideas and practice (i.e., the excommunication of infidels). Muslim recorded that: "Abu-l-Hayyaj al-Assadi told that A'li ibn abu Talib said to him: should I not send you on the same mission as Allah's Messenger sent me? Do not leave an image without obliterating it, or a high grave without leveling it (Muslim, 2009: p.534). Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), one of the famous medieval Islamic jurists and theologians, considered the construction of monuments over graves to be a source of idolatry, leading to the association of physical, material things with God (*shirk*). Therefore, it is absolutely prohibited (*haram*) by Islamic law (Beranek and Tupek, 2009: p.11). Furthermore, the Permanent Committee in Saudi Arabia has issued a *fatwa*, saying: "Building over graves is a disagreeable heresy (*bid'a*) [...] and leads to polytheism (*shirk*). It is therefore incumbent upon the ruler of Muslims or his deputy to remove what is over graves and level them to the ground" (Ibn Baz et al., 1998: p.294).

2. Location, archaeology and ethno-archaeology of the sacred place of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din

The sacred place of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din is located in Saffa village, Ramallah province, approximately 21 km northwest of Jerusalem. It is located within a residential quarter on an archaeological site with a long settlement history. An archaeological survey carried out by the author in 2009 indicates that the area of this sacred place was settled from the Roman era through the late Ottoman period, without interruption. This sacred place "covers an area of about 1,700 square meters, enclosed on all sides by a cement wall; the compound encompasses the shrine (*maqam*) itself, several rock-cuttings, a cemetery, three cisterns and remains of ancient walls" (Al-Houdalieh, 2010a: p.128). During a brief excavation campaign within the compound of the shrine, also carried out by the author in 2009, a Byzantine wine-press and traces of a Byzantine monastery were unearthed. At the same time, the construction of the shrine was fully documented through descriptive data based on locus sheets, top plans, section drawings and photography.

The shrine of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din consists of a domed grave chamber measuring 2.5 m x 2.5 m with a projection (an arched niche) set in its southern wall; a separate prayer room of about 8 m x 8 m; and finally, an open courtyard measuring 6.5 m x 5 m surrounded by a stone wall about 2 m in height. The grave chamber includes two graves. The first grave, which belongs to the Sheikh himself, is located in the center of the chamber, built of stones of different sizes, and with the upper part measuring 1.35 m long x 40 cm wide; it is raised 55 cm above the floor level and is marked with a rounded headstone on its western end. The second grave, which according to the inhabitants of Saffa village belongs to the two children of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din, is located within the niche, built of different sized stones and plastered with lime; it measures 1.5 m long x 80 cm wide and is raised 35 cm above the floor level (Fig. 1). Based on the interpretation of the building techniques of the shrine, it is most likely that the grave chamber was constructed during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, while the prayer room and courtyard were added during the early Ottoman period (Al-Houdalieh, 2010a).

Fig. 1: The tombs of the Sheikh and his two sons in 2009, before the vandalism (photo by S. Al-Houdalieh)



An ethnographic study, conducted by the author in 2009 among the residents of Saffa, indicates that the older generation of the village respects the personality of the sheikh and his shrine, believing that the sheikh enjoys some distinguished charisma from God. The Saffa population and the residents of the surrounding villages used to visit this shrine—both individually and collectively, some occasionally and others regularly—for devotional purposes: to perform ritual prayers and worship God; to pray for rain; to make vows; to seek a mediator with God in addressing the supplicant's needs and ambitions (either worldly or otherworldly); to receive healing from incurable physical or spiritual ailments; and to swear an oath by the *qur'an* in cases of conflict between individuals or groups. The older generation of Saffa and the surrounding villages are convinced that the Sheikh has both positive and negative impacts upon people, and they have circulated over time a large number of legends, most of them punishment stories (Al-Houdalieh, 2010b).

3. The vandalization and destruction

On 26th February, 2015, I received a call from a friend, saying: "the tomb of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din has been vandalized. The grave itself is turned upside down!" I visited the freshly vandalized shrine the same day of this call (Fig. 2), and found a large number of people of different ages milling about the area of the shrine. They informed me that they had called the Palestinian police, the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and the Palestinian Ministry of Religious Affairs, and that representatives of these institutions had already visited the site and gathered information on this incident.

Fig. 2: The vandalized tombs of the Sheikh and his two sons, 2015 (photo by S. Al-Houdalieh)



A short distance away, I saw an old man squatting down with his back to the trunk of an old oak tree, holding the palms of his hands to his face. I approached him slowly, sat close to him, and then started to speak reservedly about this occurrence. Shortly, he raised his head, looked at me with tears in eyes, and said: "It is a shame on all of us that we could not safeguard the grave and sanctity of the Sheikh. It is a shame on us that this is happening in our village to a highly respected Sheikh. Look, we [the Palestinians] are destroying our heritage and disfigure the historic connection with our forefathers". Suddenly, he stood up and went away, outside the compound of the shrine.

Even though Palestinian antiquities looters are aware that Muslim graves contain no funerary objects of any kind, since Muslims have never provided their deceased with mortuary goods, still they have vandalized a large number of shrines of Muslim saints, either partially or totally. These include: the shrine of al-arba'in in Bel'in village; the shrine of Hassan al-Ra'i in Jericho province; the shrine of setti Nafisa in Beitunia town, west of Ramallah; the shrine of el-Hiniyah in Beit U'r village; and those of setti Huriyah, setti Saffia, sedi el-Beider and now Shihab ed-Din, all in Saffa village. The driving force behind the vandalizing of such shrines is to reach hidden layers potentially containing valuable archaeological objects, and this requires the removal of all Islamic cultural deposits and constructions. In order to gain a better understanding of the growing phenomenon of vandalizing the shrines of Muslim saints, I interviewed 20 antiquities looters in March and April of 2015. All of the interviewees are well known to me from previous projects, are all males between 45 and 64 years of age, and they live in 20 different villages in five provinces of the West Bank. The results of these interviews show that 16 of the interviewed persons attribute this escalating phenomenon to information, maps, etc. provided to a certain number of present-day Palestinians by Turkish citizens, people whose parents and grandparents inhabited Palestine up until the First World War. The Turks claim that their families buried their wealth, especially gold, in sacred places before fleeing from the British soldiers in 1917-18. Furthermore, the other four individuals attribute this escalation in vandalizing shrines to the spreading influence of the above-mentioned *takfir* ideas and practices, spreading from Iraq and Syria into Palestine.

4. Reconstruction

Then in May of 2015, some three months after the above incident, a youth group, in cooperation with the Saffa village local council, set about to restore the ruined graves of the Sheikh and his two sons. However, this restoration was carried out without any kind of documentation and without consulting a trained restorer. In an interview on 26 June 2015 with 45-year-old A. Fallana, who supervised this restoration work, he provided me with the following information: They moved the disturbed earthen deposits carefully in order to collect all bones in a box and set the loose stones aside to use in the later restoration work. Indeed, they found smashed pieces of long and small bones but did not find complete or even fragmentary skulls. Following this, the amateur team deposited the collected bones in one spot and covered them with soil, then re-erected the two ground graves to about 50 cm above the floor surface of the chamber, using cement and stones for the grave of the Sheikh and just cement for the double grave of his two sons (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: The restored tombs of the Sheikh and his two sons, 2015 (photo by S. Al-Houdalieh)



5. Investigations

In order to find out what has transpired with this case since, I met separately on February 25 & 26, 2016, one year after the destruction of the shrine, with a police officer (M. Nasser) who was active in this case and also with the Director of Ramallah Archaeology Department (J. Mustafa). At the beginning of the interviews, I made the two interviewees aware of how their responses would be used for purposes of this study. I asked them one question: What did you do in the case of the shrine of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din? The response of the police officer is summarized as follows: Directly after our visit to the freshly vandalized shrine, we started to collect information from the inhabitants of Saffa village. Following this, we began to question possible suspects separately in the ongoing investigation of this crime. The total number of interrogated individuals in this case was five, and the duration of the interview with each was from three to five hours.

However, the results of the questioning of those individuals revealed that none of them had anything to do with this case. From that time, eleven months ago, until now, we have not interrogated anyone else. Thus the case is still open, with no charges brought or even any clear suspects. The response of the Director of Ramallah Archaeology Department, then, is summarized as follows: Based on several phone calls that we received from Saffa residents, we visited the shrine on the same day of the calls. Within three days, we wrote a detailed report and sent a copy to the unit of the Tourist Police, in order to help them in their own investigation of this case; however, until now we have not received any report back from that unit. (During the course of this interview, the Director called the tourist police unit and received the following answer: "We worked closely with another unit of the general directorate of the police institution"; the spokesperson then provided him with the same information mentioned above by the police officer.)

6. Conclusion

In early 2015, the Muslim shrine of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din, located in Saffa village west of Ramallah, was attacked by vandals or looters. This resulted in the shrine's two traditional graves, attributed to the 13th-century Sheikh and his sons, being completely demolished and dug up. About three months later local residents carried out an amateur restoration of the burial places, but without seeking any expert guidance or supervision. Despite the involvement of various law enforcement authorities, from the time of the attack until now, no suspects have ever been identified.

Whether the destruction of the tomb of Sheikh Shihab ed-Din was triggered by stories of Turkish treasure, by *takfir* (Muslim theological) influences, or by some yet unknown motive—all such encroachments upon sacred places and archaeological sites call for forceful, practical responses in order to prevent further losses to the heritage of this Land. The Palestinians must make every effort necessary to safeguard our patrimony, so as to bequeath these heritage resources intact to future generations.

Indeed, I agree wholeheartedly with the Centre for Academic Shi'a Studies (2015) when it concludes that the vandalization, destruction and demolishing of Islamic shrines and saints' graves are placing at risk the elements of Muslim identity and heritage. The ongoing practice of attacking shrines also "weakens the spiritual connection of Muslims and other individuals with the essence of religion". Furthermore, these irresponsible activities will eradicate evidences and facts of the lives of previous societies and thus disfigure the cultural landscape.

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