

The State of the Field Review:  
Ziyāra to the Shrines of the  
Twelver Shī‘i Imāms

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# The State of the Field Review: Ziyāra to the Shrines of the Twelver Shī‘i Imāms

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## Abstract

This essay surveys the past twenty years of academic scholarship on the ziyāra (visitation) to the graves of the Twelver Shī‘i Imāms. In spite of the diverse approaches to the study of ziyāra in recent years, this area in the field of Islamic Studies remains theoretically impoverished. This brief literature review compares historical and ethnographic engagements with the ziyāra ritual and raises important questions for future research agendas.

## Keywords

Shī‘a, ziyāra, Ḥusayn, Imām, wilāya, ritual,

The academic treatment of *ziyāra* (visitation of Muslim saints) in the past twenty years has engaged with a number of temporal, geographic, and sectarian approaches. Reflective of the encompassing and broad term *ziyāra* itself, the wide scholarship in this area can only best be discussed by limiting the term’s application. For the purpose of this review, I narrow my analysis to scholarship from a variety of disciplines that have engaged with the *ziyāra* to the graves of the Twelver Shī‘i Imāms. I recognize that limiting my scope in this way suggests that these ritual-space nexuses have well-defined sectarian boundaries. Given the brevity of this review, however, I seek to work within this framework albeit a problematic one, in order to provide a fruitful discussion of the more recent scholarship related to these sites in particular. In fact, much of the work discussed in this review illustrates this inherent challenge of constructing typologies with regards to *ziyāra* that are simultaneously required for analytical purposes, but may not reflect the actual situation at the sites. I begin with a brief review of Sophia Rose Arjana’s recently published *Pilgrimage in Islam: Traditional and Modern Practices* (2017) and proceed to survey both historical and more contemporary ethnographic engagements with the *ziyāra* at the shrines of the Twelver Shī‘i Imāms.

Sophia Arjana’s recent monograph (2017) is an ambitious project that surveys a vast range of pilgrimage practices in the Islamic world. One might read her work as an attempt to bridge common binaries between discursive traditions and everyday practice through engagement with historical and contemporary sources.<sup>1</sup> In spite of her efforts to de-sectarianize our understanding of *ziyāra* rituals,

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<sup>1</sup> Arjana insightfully explains, the “Scholastic dichotomy between popular and official is an effort to map epistemological certainty onto a messy reality of shared religious belief and practice.”

Sophia Rose Arjana, *Pilgrimage in Islam: Traditional and Modern Practices* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2017), 12.

the titles of her chapters (i.e. Chapter 3- “Shī‘i Pilgrimage: The Prophet’s Household”), her reliance on the Sunni *ḥadīth* corpus and secondary Western scholarship on Shī‘i ritual, undermine these efforts. While she does situate the study of Islamic pilgrimage by raising theoretical and political debates, the sheer vastness of her project inevitably results in making broad and unsubstantiated statements such as, “... the prohibition against kissing the grave and seeking blessings from... [it] are also part of the history of Muslim pilgrimage, however they are still in vogue today.”<sup>2</sup> This statement suggests that Muslims in general, face the tension between tactile devotional practices at sacred graves and some sort of authoritative condemnation. Such an assumption places the activities of many Muslims on the fringes of an unsubstantiated notion of ‘orthodox Islam’ under the guise of a very simplistic understanding of ‘*everyday* or *lived* practice’. In one sense, Arjana offers us insight into *ziyārāt* across traditions and historical communities. Yet in another sense, her scope limits her ability to provide a nuanced analysis of the pilgrimages she describes. For example, specifically in the chapter on Shī‘i pilgrimage, Arjana cites a *ḥadīth* from the son of Ḥusayn (‘Alī b. Ḥusayn Zayn al-‘Ābidīn) but erroneously attributes it to an unknown ‘Abdullāh with the justification that Ḥusayn bears the agnomen Abū ‘Abdillāh (the father of Abdullāh), and therefore must have a son who outlived him, named as such.<sup>3</sup> This error is reflective of non-Shī‘i-studies scholars often engaging with *aḥādīth* at a superficial level with little regard for the basic historical, biographical, and technical prerequisites that contextualize these primary sources.

Arjana creates a platform for students of Islamic studies to place pilgrimage rituals in conversation with one another. However, her unequal use of sources in citing Sunni *ḥadīth* directly from their authoritative texts, whilst relying almost exclusively on secondary material such as the work of Leslie Hazelton and Sayyid Hosein Nasr for the Shī‘i chapter, leads one to question if she offers a way to systematically study any of the rituals she describes. While avoiding a temporal analysis is advantageous in communicating a sense of continuity between, across, and within these rituals and practices, there is not much to anchor one’s self in to provide the reader with a better sense of direction.

Liyakat Takīm’s (2004) article, “Charismatic Appeal or Communitas? Visitation to the Shrines of the Imams,”<sup>4</sup> argues for the stark difference between Shī‘i *ziyāra* rituals at the shrines of the Imāms and Ṣūfī rituals at the shrines of their saints. Within the very short article, he asserts that the Shī‘i shrine complex is an amalgamation of hereditary authority, *baraka*, extraordinary powers, prayers, *communitas*, and a locus for the expression of socio-political grievances. Takim does not attempt to situate his work in a specific temporal or geographic location, however his sources are largely based on early Shī‘i *ḥadīth* texts (circa. 10<sup>th</sup> century). His work also problematically assumes a certain homogeneity of *ziyārāt* at the shrines of the different Imāms; thereby completely ignoring the history of patronage, local practice, and architectural distinctiveness that characterize each shrine complex. Furthermore, his discussion of Ṣūfī traditions and rituals is quite obscure and disregards the particularities of various shrines and their cultural histories. He very briefly interprets the vague *ziyāra* rituals he describes as *communitas*, noting the creation of a liminal reality that temporarily strips the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>4</sup> Liyakat, Takim. “Charismatic Appeal or Communitas? Visitation to the Shrines of the Imams,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 18, no.2 (2004): 106-120.

pilgrim of his/her structural identities. What these structural identities are, and whether or not they are in fact removed from the pilgrim remains a question which is particularly difficult to answer since Takim's universalist approach does not offer potential for an ethnographic or ethnohistorical line of inquiry.

In his short section on *ziyāra* relics and objects, Takim suggests that relics obviate the need for pilgrimage by extending the presence of the Imām and his sanctity to distant parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> This is where his myopic approach to *ziyāra* becomes problematic. Takim assumes that *ziyāra* must be defined as the visitation to the graves of Imāms, which of course has its distinct set of rituals. He does not however consider how interactions with relics do not obviate, but instead produce an event that is not as much subjunctive as it is translocative; directing the devotee back to the relic or object's source – which can often times be a shrine of an Imām. The title of the article also suggests that Ṣūfi *ziyāra* rituals center around charisma yet Takim only entertains this notion vis á vis Imāmi rituals, with little or no discussion of what this 'charisma' constitutes. While the distinction between Sūfi pilgrimage(s) and their *ziyāra* to the shrines of the Imāms is an important argument to make; the lack of specificity in discussing both of these *ziyāra* rituals occludes a productive comparative analysis.

### Historical Studies of *Ziyāra*

Rose Aslan's doctoral dissertation (2014) takes the shrine of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in Najaf as a case study for the early Shī'i community's sacralization of space and the mapping out and articulation of what this Shī'i sacred space is and does ritually. She looks to the activities of Shī'i scholars in elevating 'Alī's bodily praesentia in the space through articulating the theological notion of *walāya*, legitimating the location of 'Alī's grave, and formulating codified *ziyāra* rituals to construct the space as a site for enacting piety and communal identity. For example, she considers the hagiographical accounts of 'Alī in the works of al-Mufid to have, "... further established 'Alī's authority, and ultimately made 'Alī's body and grave a sought-after pilgrimage site among pious Shī'is. By investing 'Alī's body with miraculous power during his life, it is only logical that scholars such as al-Mufid would also attribute these powers to 'Alī's grave after his death."<sup>6</sup>

Aslan also engages with critical-spatial theory, relying on J.Z Smith and Tweed to suggest that 'Alī's shrine is translocative and transtemporal in transporting pilgrims to the past.<sup>7</sup> However, she does not clearly develop this process or its direction. Many, if not all pilgrimage rituals seek to reproduce a significant mythical/historical past through the microcosmic ritual event.<sup>8</sup> It is thus unclear how, by stating that the shrine is translocative since "...people create the spaces through their movement and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>6</sup> Rose Aslan, "From Body to Shrine: The Construction of Sacred Space at the Grave of 'Alī ibn abi Talib in Najaf" (PhD diss., Chapel Hill, 2014), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, anthropologist Rupert Stasch's articulation of ritual as poetically dense figuration of macrocosmic order in microcosmic action.

Rupert Stasch, "Ritual and Oratory Revisited: The Semiotics of Effective Action," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 160.

activities within the spaces...”<sup>9</sup>, Aslan is arguing for anything beyond the fact that the *ziyāra* is a ritual activity. Much of the evidence Aslan employs could inform a clearer articulation of this ‘translocative’ potential, which may be worth further exploring especially as an alternative to Takīm’s cursory discussion of *communitas*.

Aslan asserts that her analysis is largely limited to an elite scholarly worldview of Islamic ritual that is prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature.<sup>10</sup> While this is an important consideration in any study of pre-modern religions, must we assume that the religious elite was so distanced from the lived experiences of the lay pilgrims? Wael Hallaq’s (2009) work on *sharī‘a* for example, suggests that medieval scholarly legal productions were very much aligned with everyday legal practices evidenced by recovered contemporaneous documents.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond Aslan’s work, Khalid Sindawi (2006, 2004, 2010 2012) has produced the majority of scholarship related specifically to *ziyāra* in this period. It seems that this work, as is the case with many studies of early Shī‘ism, is limited to an exposition of *aḥādīth* and other literary productions. Sindawi surveys *aḥādīth* mainly related to Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī and Karbala. This includes a thematic discussion of the Euphrates and its associated rituals (2004), poetry composed about *ziyāra* to Karbala (2006), the burial place(s) of the head of Ḥusayn (2010), and the land of Karbala (2012).<sup>12</sup> His *ḥadīth*-centric approach does make this genre more accessible for non-Arabic speaking students of Islamic studies, however there are many instances where his work lacks sufficient analytic and descriptive context.

### *Ziyāra* in the Qajar-Era

Unfortunately, the brevity of this review does not allow for a meaningful discussion of scholarship specific to the Safavid period, despite its prominence and relevance to the field. However, Marzolph (2014) and Morikawa (2012) provide us with interesting discussions of *ziyāra* during the Qajar period.

In her chapter on pilgrimages to the Iraqi ‘*Atabāt*, Morikawa traces the *ziyāra* to the shrines in Ottoman Iraq performed by Iranian pilgrims in the nineteenth century, when the number of Iranian pilgrims to the sites reached its zenith. He examines travelogues and diplomatic documents between the Qajar and Ottoman empires and sheds light on the attitudes and conditions of pilgrims and state responses to them. He concludes that sites associated to Jews, Sunnis, or Šūfis were not considered

<sup>9</sup> Aslan, “From Body to Shrine,” 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>11</sup> Wael Hallaq, *Sharī‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformation* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> See Khalid A. Sindawi, “The Cult of the Euphrates and its Significance among the Imāmi Shī‘a” *Der Islam* 8, no. 2 (2004): 249-269.

-- “Visit to the Tomb of Al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī in Shiite Poetry: First to Fifth Century AH (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE)” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 2 (2006): 230-258.

-- “The Head of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī : Its Various Places of Burial and the Miracles that it Performed” in *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-existence*, eds. Marshall H. Berger, Yitzhak Reiter, and Leonard Hammer (London: Routledge, 2009), 264-273.

-- “The Sanctity of Karbala in Shiite Thought” in *Saints and their Pilgrims in Iran and Neighbouring Countries*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishers, 2012), 21-40.

*ziyāra* sites by Iranian pilgrims, thus rendering the term *ziyāra* an exclusive emblem of Shī‘ism in this period.<sup>13</sup> Morikawa further suggests that shrines were not only sites of spiritual devotion, but political and material trade. Although his use of understudied sources contributes to expanding our understanding of *ziyāra* rituals, his observations and analysis are all too brief considering the value of his documents. One wonders if this is a result of the author’s uncritical engagement with the sources or if it is indicative of the limits of legal documentary evidence more generally.

Marzolph approaches the *ziyāra* from a material culture lens through an extensive analysis and description a nineteenth-century Persian illustrated pilgrimage scroll. In doing so, he demonstrates how the pilgrimage experiences, activities, and imaginations take the form of verse and image.<sup>14</sup> Noteworthy in this regard are the marked differences in the shape, size, and general visual aesthetic of each shrine represented in the scroll. Marzolph’s observations might therefore indicate variation in the bodily interactions with each space dictated by each shrine’s architectural and spatial configurations—a possibility that Takim (2004) fails to consider. His analysis might also inform which shrines became or remained more significant than others as *ziyāra* sites for Iranian pilgrims. For example, he notes, “The tomb of Ḥusayn in Karbala remains, as it has always been, the most important Shī‘i sacred site. But the final and, in fact, the ultimate destination of the lithographed pilgrimage scroll is the sanctuary of Imam Riḍā in Mashhad.”<sup>15</sup> These observations raise important questions about the causes and consequences of the ranking and re-ranking of Shī‘i sacred shrine cities throughout history.

Marzolph’s work is however problematic as it identifies the extensive weeping and mourning described in the verses surrounding the *ziyarāt* sites to be the obvious result of “...the relative guilt the pilgrims would share as the descendants of those who did not assist Ḥusayn and his companions.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, he suggests that the pilgrims mourn *because* they become aware of their own sins after hearing the tragedy of Karbala.<sup>17</sup> It seems Marzolph is reiterating the redemptive narrative advocated by David Pinault (1999) and Mahmoud Ayoub (1978), which has been recently criticized by Karen Ruffle (2015).<sup>18</sup>

Nakash’s (1995) article approaches the increase in pilgrims at the shrines as noted by Morikawa (2012) through analyzing the activities of the *mujtahids* who, in the wake of the Safavid Empire’s collapse, centered themselves in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. He looks at the *mujtahids’* conscious responses to the challenges to the *ziyāra* ritual posed by Islamic modernists, Wahhabi revivals, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Tomoko Morikawa, “Pilgrimages to the Iraqi ‘Atabāt from Qajar Era Iran,” in *Saints and Their Pilgrims in Iran and Neighbouring Countries*, ed. Pedram Khosronejad (Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishers, 2012), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Marzolph, “From Mecca to Mashhad: The Narrative of an Illustrated Shī‘i Pilgrimage Scroll from the Qajar Period,” *Muqarnas Online* 31, no.1 (2014): 237.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> See David Pinault, “Shia Lamentation Rituals and Reinterpretations of the Doctrine of Intercession: Two Cases from Modern India,” *History of Religions* 38, no.3 (Feb. 1999): 285-305.

See also Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: a Study of the Devotional Aspects of ‘Ashura’ in Twelver Shi‘ism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

See also Karen Ruffle, “Wounds of Devotion: Reconceiving Matam in Shī‘i Islam,” *History of Religions* 55, no.2 (2015): 172-195.

formation of modern Iran under Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>19</sup> These responses took the form of defending the concept of *shafā‘a* (intercession) and the crucial role played by *ziyāra* in the preservation of Shi‘ism and Imāma and in distinguishing the Shī‘i community from its Sunni coreligionists.<sup>20</sup> Nakash’s work highlights the value of studying an area of inquiry and analysis that is often neglected as a result of the scholastic dichotomy between popular and official religion. His observations are an example of the way those often privy to the construction of the authoritative tradition (i.e. the *mujtahids*) cannot be studied as divorced from the lay religious community.

### Studies of Contemporary *Ziyāra*:

Scholarship on contemporary *ziyāra* is largely situated in ethnographic studies of pilgrims. However, most of these studies focus on foreign pilgrim groups or diaspora communities travelling to the shrines in Iraq and Iran.

Mona Moufahim’s article (2013) centers on the material quality of the *ziyāra* experience by analyzing Arab Belgian pilgrims’ consumer identity through the liturgical and soteriological gift giving practices associated to the various Shī‘i *ziyarat*.<sup>21</sup> She describes liturgical objects such as the green cloth used for *Baraka*, *turbas* for prostration, as well as soteriological gifts such as performing the *Arba‘in* walk, to render tangible the intangible experience of the pilgrimage.<sup>22</sup> However Moufahim’s analysis is limited in its attempt to explain the sedimentary assumptions, worldviews, and beliefs that motivate such gift giving practices. Her work would benefit from effectively disaggregating the shared cultural and customary background of her interlocutors from their gift giving activities as distinctively ‘Shī‘i’. For example, Moufahim mentions the distribution of cakes and sweets in the shrines<sup>23</sup> but does not question whether such a practice, in terms of what foods are purchased, how they are distributed, and what supplications would warrant such a gift, are culturally specific to the pilgrim’s general Arab or Belgian background.

Shannahan’s (2015) work offers one of the few ethnographies of *ziyāra* to the shrines in Iraq by Iraqi pilgrims themselves. Noting the limited scholarship on contemporary Iraqī *ziyāra* rituals she conceives of *ziyāra* as sociopolitical experience that relates the *ziyāra* of Karbala to the conditions of life for Iraqis. Her analysis considers these shrines to facilitate the ‘embodied technology’ of ritual by drawing the trauma of the present to the past.<sup>24</sup> In what seems as another engagement with Fisher’s ‘Karbala Paradigm’, Shannahan understands the *ziyāra* ritual as a deeply political activity in the context of her study. She reads the “Shi‘ah impulse expressed through *ziyarat* practices as incredibly located (scaffolded through and via the Shi‘ah narrative of history, in these sites, to these people) and radically

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<sup>19</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, “The Visitation of the Shrines of the Imams and the Shī‘i Mujtahids in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995): 158.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>21</sup> Mona Moufahim, “Religious Gift Giving: an Ethnographic Account of a Muslim Pilgrimage,” *Marketing Theory* 1, no. 21 (2013): 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Dervla Zaynab Shannahan, “I Love You More: An Account of Performing Ziyarat in Iraq,” *Performing Islam* 4, no. 1 (2015): 88.

non-specific...[Z]iyarat practices [are] one (Shi‘ah) meditation on in/justice..., amplified, affirmed and sharpened even by the instability of the actual landscape in which contemporary ziyarat unfolds.”<sup>25</sup> Her work serves as a useful foundation to test the salience of *ziyāra* as political protest especially in post- ISIS Iraq.

Finally, Musa’s (2013) study of Malaysian *ziyāra* to Iran and Iraq describes the Shī‘i pilgrims’ activities at Karbala and Mashhad. Engaging with symbolic interactionism, he observes the axiological aspects of the ritual that allows Shī‘i Malaysians to legitimize the ‘grey areas’ of Shī‘i rites such as seeking intercession from the graves of the Imams, to their Sunni coreligionists.<sup>26</sup> While Musa’s work points towards much needed inroads in studying *ziyārāt* among Shī‘i diaspora communities, it is more successful as a ethnographic overview of Malaysian *ziyāra* activities rather than articulating a compelling axiological argument.

### Concluding Remarks & Future Research Agendas

The sources discussed in this review are by no means comprehensive as they are focused on scholarship strictly related to the *performance* of *ziyāra* rituals and thus exclude work on the history of the shrines themselves. However, it is hoped that this discussion has identified some patterns in the field of *ziyāra* to the shrines of the Twelver Shī‘i Imāms. Almost all of the sources mentioned in this paper study the *ziyāra* in relation to the articulation of Shī‘i sectarian identity. Aslan (2014) sees Najaf as a space of sectarian contestation between early Shī‘i and Sunni narratives of ‘Alī’s death and burial. Morikawa (2012) and Nakash (1995) similarly see the *ziyāra* to the shrines to be deeply tied to the Shī‘i communities’ Sunni coreligionists, be it the face of Wahabbi reformists or Ottoman state officials. Arjana’s (2017) work however reminds us that while certain *ziyāra* rites remain exclusive to the Twelver Shī‘i community, the *ziyāra* to many of these sites fall along very fluid sectarian lines.

When looking at the field as a whole, we can conclude that studies of the *ziyāra* remain theoretically impoverished. We might begin evaluating how helpful *communitas* is as an analytic framework for *ziyāra* in various historical and geographic contexts and explore potential alternatives. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of focused studies on classical and contemporary *ziyāra* manuals. Rather than resorting to these sources as encyclopedic *ḥadīth* references, it is worth developing new approaches to these rich primary texts that allow us to ask more nuanced questions about the work they do. Linguistic anthropology may offer promising potential to such a project. Finally, we have virtually no scholarship on the *ziyāra* to the Jannat al-Baqī‘ cemetery or Shī‘i pilgrimages to Medina more generally. The Hijaz thus remains an isolated and alienated region of study both in terms of Shī‘i *ziyāra* rituals and the ritual activities practices of the Shī‘i community in the Gulf more generally.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>26</sup> Mohammad Faizal Musa, “Axiology of Pilgrimage: Malaysian Shi‘ite Ziyarat in Iran and Iraq,” *Cultura* 10, no. 1 (2013): 67.