Visualising the sites and monuments of Islamic pilgrimage

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The first House of God to be set up for men was at Bakkah (Mecca) the blessed,
a guidance for the people of the world.
It contains clear signs, and the spot where Abraham had stood.
And anyone who enters it will find security.
And whosoever can afford should visit the House on a pilgrimage as duty to God.
(Qur'an 3:96–97).

The greatest share of visual representations of holy sites in the Islamic lands is accorded to Mecca. As Islam’s sacred direction, Mecca is the focal point and required physical orientation (qibla) of canonical prayer (salat), of buildings of worship, of the deceased who lie buried in their graves, and the destination of obligatory pilgrimage (Hajj and ‘umra). Medina – the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) – and Jerusalem – qibla from 610–623, but charged with many other historical and cultural meanings – are close followers in frequency of visual depiction: the three cities are often configured, in various permutations, to provide visualisations, optical aides-memoires of places visited, or perhaps of things never seen. While Medina was important for its historical role as the cradle of Islam, first home to a nascent Muslim community (umma) after the ‘flight’ (hijra) from Mecca in 622, its status was enhanced through the burials of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the first two caliphs Abu Bakr and ‘Umar in the tomb of the mosque of the Prophet Muhammad. Their burials vouchsafed the future of the mosque as a locus of visitation and veneration. Jerusalem, by contrast, was closer to Mecca in cosmological and eschatological significance: both cities carried associations spanning the arc of time from the very moment of God’s Creation until the end of days and Last Judgment. Each of the three cities, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, figures prominently amid a corpus of visual representations that was made in a variety of two-dimensional formats, pictorial modes, and media. Despite stylistic or formal differences of different scales, a consistent means of representation was developed and applied to the depiction of Islam’s holiest places, rendering these sites an iconic immediacy and making ‘the centre out there’ present to the viewer, wherever, or however distant, he or she might be.

The practice of representing sacred topographies was not limited to Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. From the early medieval period, architecture marking the burial sites of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, religious leaders, or saintly persons (whose conduct in life offered the living suitable exemplars and hence a means of shaping and improving personal moral conduct), began to populate the urban and extra-urban landscapes of the Islamic lands, while other structures commemorated the occurrence of events associated with those persons, their deeds or miracles (karamat), or the simple fact of their now distant historical presence at the place. Such sites, termed ‘place of witnessing’ (mashhad) – as perpetual memorials marking permanent physical presence through bodily remains or evanescent presences and actions – became loci for the expression of forms of piety outside the strictest orthopraxy of Sunni Islam, and engendered a form of
pilgrimage termed ‘visitation’ (ziyara). The content of one scroll, signed by Sayyid Muhammad Chishti and dated 1787–88, reflects the personal piety and beliefs of its recipient by including not only images of Mecca but also of Medina, Jerusalem, and Najaf among other places (cat. no. 11). Najaf is the location of the shrine of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661), one of the most important centres for Shi‘i pilgrims. The scroll may thus be seen to document a group of shrines visited in ziyara, non-obligatory visits to Medina and Jerusalem – which were often combined with the obligatory pilgrimage (Hajji) – as well as the Hajj itself to Mecca. Another scroll dated 1522, lacking any images, is an attestation of visitation (ziyaratnama) to Mashhad, location of the shrine of the eighth Shi‘i imam, ‘Ali Riza (d. 818), visited by Shi‘is and other Muslims alike (cat. no. 4). Though later in date, these works on paper reflect a process that had been in the making since the medieval period: that is, the steady and ineluctable expansion of holy sites across the Islamic lands that made local landscapes share some of the sacred attributes of Islam’s most holy cities.

The paper scroll was one of the most common portable artefacts of pilgrimage and a large number include either hand-drawn, or block-printed, and coloured images of Mecca, Medina, and, less frequently, Jerusalem. The practice is known through material evidence datable to the late eleventh century but it continued into the early modern era. Texts written on the scrolls indicate that many examples were made as legal evidence of pilgrimage by proxy, where an individual who had already performed pilgrimage to fulfil their personal religious obligation would undertake the pilgrimage on behalf of a living or deceased person, commissioned to do so by either the individual or a family member. The majority of intact scrolls present images of the sacred topographies of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem oriented vertically down the length of the scroll so that each image would be legible as an expansive column from a single vantage point (as distinct from each site being represented perpendicular to the unfolding horizontal expanse of the scroll to form a series of adjacent picture cells). Less commonly, scrolls depict pilgrim itineraries in more expansive terms – of the sort frequently narrated in written sources – and include the multiple sites visited en route to Mecca and on the journey home (cat. no. 11).

Though post-medieval scrolls often register physical changes to the built environment of Mecca, its sacred precinct (al-Masjid al-Haram), and environs (Mount Arafat, Muzdalifa, and Mina), the visual conventions of their images can be traced to the corpus of medieval examples with which they share several tendencies. The schematic nature of these diagrams conjures a dense matrix of information through line drawing and flat fields of opaque watercolour or washes of pigment. The information includes the relative size and spatial interrelation of three-dimensional architectural structures or site markers built low to the ground, function, and points of entry and exit. Plan views are combined with elevations in seamless harmonies that make sense as totalities – as unified images – but that equally implicate the beholder in a series of cognitive movements by which he or she adopts various perspectives in relation to what is shown through the image. The diagram actually permits multiple points of imaginary entrance and internal movement that would be constrained in other visual modes, such as the perspectival view or the bird’s eye topographic view.

In one scroll, dated 3 March 1778, Mecca’s Masjid al-Haram is configured as a bounded space, a perimeter constructed as a rectangle of porticoes of alternating red and black archways surmounted by domes and
opened through nineteen doors, each one labelled with its name (e.g. Bab al-salam, Bab al-nabi; see cat. no. 7). The doors project outward from the line of the porticoes, the number of their openings ranging from one to five. Each portico is represented as one would see it from its respective approach, the four porticoes folded inward toward the central space. Here we see the seven minarets, which encircle the perimeter wall, also flattened onto the central field but shown in such a manner as to convey multiple perspectives of vision. The Ka‘ba stands slightly off-axis as a black cube in the centre field, its black stone (al-hajar al-aswad), door (bab al-Ka’ba), water spout (mizab al-rahma), and black textile covering (kiswa) with its embroidered gold band (hizam) clearly demarcated. As in other images, the Ka‘ba is visualised through its northeast façade as one would see it entering the haram from the Bab al-salam, also named Bab al-Shayba, the most common point of entry to the ‘space of circumambulation’ (mataf) (fig. 4). A nearly completed circle encloses the Ka‘ba to mark the mataf, denoting the space and practice of circumambulation, while a small semi-circle (al-hatim) immediately adjacent to the Ka‘ba marks the burial site (al-hijr) of Hajar and Isma’il. (Many other prophets are believed to have been buried in the vicinity of the Ka‘ba.) Spreading out beyond this constellation of buildings and site markers is a series of covered, freestanding structures (maqam) identified with Abraham and the schools of Islamic law, the ‘Well of Zamzam’ (bi‘r Zamzam), a moveable wooden staircase (madra) used to access the elevated door of the Ka‘ba, and an outdoor pulpit (minbar). The maqam Ibrahim was believed to protect a stone where Abraham had stood – leaving the traces of his footprints (qadam) behind him – during the construction of the Ka‘ba.

A second image of Mecca’s Masjid al-Haram, possibly a fragment from a once longer pilgrimage scroll (the lower section depicts the ‘trotting space’ [mas’ a] between the hillocks of al-Safa and al-Marwa, making it comparable to medieval examples), highlights the shared visual conventions used by artists in the eighteenth century (cat. no. 8). It differs from the 1778 scroll by its overall attempt to enhance the visual order of the sacred precinct: here the minarets occupy their correct positions in relation to the perimeter wall (now shown as three layers of arcades folded inward), but are arranged parallel to it. This de-clutters the central field in which the Ka‘ba, while not exactly central, has been moved towards the intersection of imaginary horizontal and vertical axes and is framed by a complete circular mataf rendered in grey pigment and linked to a network of pathways that radiate outward. Other elements of the 1778 scroll are found in the same positions here. By suggesting a more evident geometric model for organising the components of the Masjid al-Haram, cat. no. 8 invokes the longstanding manuscript tradition of the qibla chart and map. One of the functions of these images, which appear in manuscripts from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward, was to demonstrate the Ka‘ba’s privileged position within a sacred geography as axis mundi, its walls related to sectors of the inhabited earth, its corners (arkan) roughly oriented toward the points of the compass and one axis aligned with the rising of Canopus, and the terrestrial point where a vertical axis extended to the heavens and the Ka‘ba’s heavenly parallel, ‘The Frequented House’ (Bayt al-ma‘mur), which was set below God’s throne (’arsh).

In their original form scrolls cat. nos 7 and 8 might have included depictions of other sites near Mecca or those in Medina and Jerusalem. Whether or not that is the case, another form of object – the
underglaze-painted ceramic tile – testifies to the autonomy of the Masjid al-Haram as a stand-alone image that could be fashioned as a multiple, portable object (cat. no. 9). Many examples are extant today in religious buildings, where they are set into the walls marking qibla, or are assumed to have come from such contexts. Placed in such a position, the Meccan image offered a tangible representation of the distant sacred centre as qibla. The tiles present polychrome maps of the Masjid al-Haram, identifying the Ka’ba and key commemorative sites in its immediate proximity through image and text in the form of labels deftly rendered in naskh script that secure the correct identification of their visual adjuncts. In cat. no. 9, the holy image is set beneath a text composed of two verses from the Qur’an, 3:96–97 – lacking the final line of verse ninety-seven – which describe the Ka’ba as the ‘first house’ (awwal baya’t) set up on earth, a place of ‘clear signs’ (fitih ayat bayyinah), and the ‘spot’ where Abraham stood (maqam Ibrāhīm). Though the verses infer the origin of the first ‘House of God’ in the time of Adam, Abraham’s role as rebuilder of the Ka’ba is introduced by reference to the ‘spot’ where he stood. This also infers a forward temporal connection to the Prophet Muhammad who, like Abraham before him, restored the primordial monotheism of the Ka’ba by removing traces of polytheism.

The Qur’anic verses merely secure a reading of the ceramic tile that obtains to all other related diagrammatic representations of Mecca, regardless of their medium of execution. The site is a constellation of ‘signs’ (ayat) that can also be understood as marks, wonders, or miracles, an ontological status that extends equally to the ‘verses’ (ayat) of the Qur’an. Regardless of their specific materiality or historicity – for they were changed and replaced over time, a fact frequently acknowledged in descriptions of Mecca – the architectural elements and other objects of the haram marked events from a prophetic history that culminated in the actions and mission of the Prophet Muhammad and whose significance was secured in the rites of pilgrimage he established in the ‘Farewell Pilgrimage’ of 632. The images place emphasis on the host of markers to form a visual catalogue of the holy that one might visit in the itinerary of either a physical or mental pilgrimage.

A key dimension of these images relates to their temporal implications, especially when one considers the history of changes made to the physical environments of Mecca and Medina and dramatised through the new technology of photography in the nineteenth century and after (figs 1–5). Images of the Masjid al-Haram
in Mecca created between the medieval and early modern periods often register changes made to the site through expansion and new construction, but these are minimal, and mostly peripheral, in comparison to continuities of position and morphology that stress an eternal temporal order. The importance of the architectural elements of the Ka'ba, and the Masjid al-Haram in its totality, did not lie in their historical fabric, their historical materiality, but in their capacity to mark and commemorate sacred loci associated with events in the timetable of creation, across the history of prophecy from Adam to Muhammad.

The same function is reflected in images of the Masjid al-Haram: their intended purpose was not a factual presentation of everything one might see, though this aspect may have been developed and pronounced in special cases and shaped by political desires. Rather, the images stress morphological continuity in their pictorial renditions of the Ka'ba – comprising a cubic form articulated by an elevated doorway, water spout, black stone, and textile covering – as well as the mataf, al-hijr, al-hatim, the ‘Well of Zamzam’, maqam ibrahim, and other structures. Each element had a chronological anchor, whether in the time of Abraham (and Hajar and Isma'il), or the Prophet Muhammad. While the black stone was intimately linked to Adam, Abraham and Muhammad, for example, the doorway and its textile covering – a curtain (sitra) – were particularly resonant of the history of the Ka'ba from the Prophet Muhammad's time onward. The locations of these elements were preserved over time despite being adapted or substituted. In reality, the black stone was the most constant element of the Ka'ba, there since the inception of the ‘House of God’ – God sent the stone to Adam – preserved in Mount Abu Quabays east of Mecca at the time of the flood, restored to its place at the time of Abraham and Isma'il's rebuilding, and later reinstalled by the Prophet Muhammad. Other elements such as the kiswa, mizab, and sitara were frequently replaced, often annually, and were given as gifts to the shrine (cat. no. 6), though the Ka'ba is always depicted veiled in its black kiswa (fig. 5). Once these furnishings had served their purpose, the objects were maintained as relics and sometimes cut apart and distributed.

Images of Islam's holy cities appeared in other contexts, particularly books of various topics related, or unrelated, to pilgrimage. The Ka'ba appears as a setting in a number of poetic works and histories (cat. no. 5). One of the most frequently illustrated manuscripts was the Futuh al-haramayn ('Description of the
[two] holy sanctuaries'] by Muhyi Lari (d. 1526 or 1527), completed in 1506, a Persian-verse guide for pilgrims making the Hajj, that included instructions on the places to visit, prayers to be made, and other rituals to be performed. Illustrations to the *Futuh al-haramayn* include the sites in Mecca and its hinterland as well as Medina. Dedicated to the ruler of Gujarat, Muzaffar ibn Mahmud Shah, Muhyi Lari’s text proliferated from the late sixteenth century onward.14 While images in the *Futuh al-haramayn* are closely related to the pictorial modes and models found in pilgrimage certificates, new ways of representing Mecca and Medina appeared in another widely copied and disseminated book, the *Dala’il al-khayrat* ('Ways of edification'), by Muhammad ibn Suleyman al-Jazuli. Completed before his death in 1465, al-Jazuli’s book presents prayers, a host of devotional materials related to the Prophet Muhammad, and a description of his tomb in Medina.

The most frequent practice of illustrating the *Dala’il al-khayrat* consisted of a double-page image pairing the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina with the *Masjid al-Haram* in Mecca (cat. nos 1–3). Various modes of representation were employed to portray the two holy sites and these coexisted over time. In one mode, Mecca’s *Masjid al-Haram* and Medina’s Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad are shown in a schematic form reminiscent of the pilgrimage scrolls, with architecture shown in simultaneous plan and elevation views to produce a unified field, but subject to a level of abstraction that dispenses with relative scale (cat. no. 2). The tomb, marked by three cenotaphs, is wildly out of proportion to the covered mosque space adjacent to it, and for reasons that are obvious enough. The entire surface of the page is covered to form a brightly coloured and patterned surface, another form of abstraction intended, presumably, to connote sacrality by a literal form of illumination. In another mode, the holy cities are shown in bird’s eye views, topographic images that position the sacred sites in relation to a wider urban environment and the landscapes beyond (cat. no. 1).15 Each image strikes a balance between a shorthand rendition of the monument and the articulation of its unique and important elements. In effect, these images are more closely related to portraits in the form of visualisation that they offer to beholders.

Despite the fact that little is known at present about the specific function, or contemporary reception, of images of Islam’s holy sites, some deductions can be made from their visual forms. Context helps to elucidate cultural meanings and possible uses for images found in books or tiles marking qibla, suggesting their role as devotional tools. For the pilgrimage scrolls, examples from the Ayyubid, Seljuq, and Mamluk periods are predominantly records of pilgrimages by proxy and served an evidentiary role that the religious obligation of pilgrimage had been met. Other scrolls were presumably acquired by pilgrims in Mecca at the conclusion of their pilgrimage and kept as personal mementos or tokens.16 Whether the scrolls were inherently private objects or had a display aspect cannot be ascertained. Despite their important differences, however, the effect of images of Mecca, Medina and other holy sites is to transform geography into religious topography, to present pilgrimage spaces through their symbolic structures, and, in effect, to authenticate a set of religious practices and beliefs. Such images possessed the double function of serving as adjuncts to lived experiences — activating memories of the mind and movements of the body — and enabling imaginary journeys. They are the visual constructions of sacred spaces that employ a number of techniques — aggregations of boundaries, thresholds, markers, and coordinates — to orient their beholder in the perpetual time and space of the holy.


6. Among many examples one can mention the Shrine of the Footprint of 'Ali northwest of Khashan, Iran. A late stone dated 1211-12 records and visualises a dream of Sayyid Fahar al-Din Hasun al-Tabar. In the dream, the sayyid met 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and was instructed to build a shrine at a pilgrimage site. The tile depicts the footprints of a horse and camel, which stood outside the entrance to a cave where the sayyid met 'Ali. Many other examples - portable objects of ceramic and paper - visualise footprints, the traces of real presences (also see cat. no. 12), while several shrines contain the physical imprints of footprints. For the tile, see Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (eds.), The Legacy of Ceramics: Khurāṣi Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1250-1350 (New York/New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2002), cat. no. 199.

7. Types of mašāḥad are often distinguished as sites of burial and/or martyrdom and sites that are by nature a virtual 'visual memorial' (mašāḥad ra'm). The single term ziyyara belies a complex and variegated historical and religious phenomenon. Some recent studies that give welcome texture to this complexity include Christopher S. Taylor, 'In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyyara and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Josef M. Meri, The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria (Oxford: University Press, 2002); and Daniella Talman-Heller, Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sepulchres under the Zengids and Ayyubids (66-1350) (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Taylor's book carefully explores debates between religious leaders on the legitimacy of ziyyara and the key concept of human intercession between God and the individual. For a history of the shrine at Masjhad, see Mary Farhat, Displaying Piety: The Shrine of Imam 'Ali al-Rida in Masjhad under the Safawids, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2002.

8. The pilgrimage scrolls are discussed in Jânine Sourdel-Thomine and Dominique Sourdel, 'Nouveaux documents sur l'histoire religieuse et sociale de Damas au moyen âge,' Revue des Études Islamiques, 33 (1966), pp. 1-45; idem, 'Une collection médiévale de certificats de pèlerinage...


20 For the kiwa, see M. Gaudez-Demomblynes, 'Le voile de la Ka’ba', Studia Islamica, 2 (1954), pp. 5-21. On the history of the mahmal – the pilgrim caravan instituted by the Mamluks that included the kiwa – see Jacques Jonier, Le mahmal et la caravane égyptienne des pèlerins de la Mecque, XIIIe-XVe siècles (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1953).


23 In Mecca in 1853, Richard Burton witnessed Indian artists making images for pilgrims. See Richard Francis Burton, Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah (2 vols) (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1853), vol. 1, p. 341. Another kind of image-bearing object included printed sheets of paper. A metal plaque in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (cat. 54.9), dated to the eighteenth century, is engraved with Qur'anic verses, prayers, and invocations to God and the Prophet Muhammad set around two images of al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. The content of the texts suggests a talismanic function for the printed image.
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