CHAPTER SIX

OF SAINTS AND SCRIBES: THE TIMURID SHRINE AS A VEHICLE FOR AGROMANAGEMENT

The Cult of Saints and the Visitation of Tombs in Medieval Iran

Tomb shrines of Muslim religious scholars, saints, and mystics, both real and legendary, were a ubiquitous feature in the cultural landscape of the medieval Islamic world. Objects of popular piety and visitation for the purpose of partaking of the baraka, or charisma, of the saintly individual buried there or for making a vow, they had many functions and served many purposes besides those that are the concern of anthropologists and historians of religion. While the opinions of the juridical authorities regarding the practice of the visitation of graves (ziyārat-i qubūr) differed, since the ambivalent prophetic Tradition on which they were based both prohibited and allowed the practice, in the main they were not positive. Ibn Taimiyya, the influential Hanbalite theologian and jurist of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, condemned the practice altogether in his writings. But in the eastern Islamic world, and in Iran and Central Asia in particular, such categorical views, even if held, were rarely observed, and the practice of ziyāra was so widespread as to constitute one of the most prevalent forms of Islamic devotion in medieval times.


3 See Memon, Ibn Taimiya’s Struggle, 13–17, 254–64; and Meri, Cult of Saints, 130ff.
The Shafi’ite jurist Fażlullāh b. Rūzbihān Khunjī (d. 927/1521), whose views may be said to represent mainstream Sunni opinion in the late medieval Persianate world, handed down a ruling on the subject in which he expressed agreement with the consensus reached by latter-day jurists that there was no reason to prohibit the practice, so long as the etiquette (ādāb) observed at such times was in conformity with Islamic practice and did not include such “heretical innovations” as rubbing oneself against the grave, kissing it, circumambulating it, or reciting the Qur’ān over it (although opinion regarding the latter practice was divided). He counsels, for example, that one should stand with one’s back to the qibla, or direction of prayer, and pronounce certain standard salutations to the dead. Even though women were probably the most frequent practitioners, all of this applied only to men, as the visitation of graves by women was regarded as reprehensible (makrūh) at best, the argument being that women were more prone to displays of grief, which were not in keeping with Islamic views on the hereafter.

The crux of the matter, however, was not the visitation of graves per se but rather the danger that such visitation, particularly of significant tomb shrines at designated times of the year, might resemble the pilgrimage to Mecca (hāj), and even be regarded as a substitute for that religious obligation. All medieval jurists, both eastern and western, appear to have been in agreement regarding this last point. Ibn Taymiyya’s disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyya (d. 1350) decried visitation rites that were plainly in imitation of the hāj, such as circumambulating the grave and shaving the head, and the Egyptian theologian Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī (d. 1505) put it bluntly when he referred to ziyāra as

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1 Khunjī, Miḥmān-nāma, 331–35; also 336–38 (with respect to pilgrimage to the ‘Alid shrine at Mashhad); and Ott, Transoxanien und Turkestan, 304 (although the text of the entire ruling has not been translated). Before moving to Uzbek Central Asia where he became an adviser on religious matters to the Shibanid ruler, Khunjī had been active at the Aq Qoyunlu court in Iran. In his opinion, the Prophet’s original prohibition of the practice was based on the fact that, in the early days of Islam, the Arabs were idol worshippers who revered inanimate objects, and since a corpse was inanimate, the visitation of graves was regarded as being connected with idolatry. Later, however, the practice was deemed commendable (mustahabb) on the grounds that it made the visitor mindful of death.

2 Khunjī, Miḥmān-nāma, 332. Besides, Khunjī says, women were supposed to stay at home anyway, where they belonged. For makrūh on the scale of permissibility in Islamic law, see Johansen, Contingency in a Sacred Law, 511.

3 For the problematic relationship between ziyāra and hāj, see Meri, Cult of Saints, 125ff.