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Scents of Space: Early Islamic Pilgrimage, Perfume, and Paradise

Adam Bursi*

Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands

adambursi@gmail.com

Abstract

Within some of the earliest textual and material evidence for the history of Islam, pilgrimage appears as an important ritual of devotion, identity, and community. Yet modern scholarship has given little attention to early Muslims' sensory experiences of pilgrimage sites and what they physically encountered while there. This article examines the importance of smell within Islamic pilgrimage practices of the first/seventh and second/eighth centuries. Drawing upon literary and material evidence, I reconstruct several olfactory components of pilgrimage in this period, including intensive usage of perfume and incense at pilgrimage destinations such as the Ka'ba and the Dome of the Rock, as well as pilgrims' collection and ingestion of scented materials from these locations. I then argue that the prominence of pleasing aromas at these sacred spaces is connecting to early Islamic ideas about the proximity of paradise to these pilgrimage sites.

Keywords

pilgrimage, *ḥağğ*, Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, Mecca, smell, perfume, incense, paradise

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Résumé

Dans certaines des premières sources textuelles et matérielles de l'histoire de l'islam, le pèlerinage apparaît comme un rituel important de dévotion, d'identité et de communauté. Néanmoins, dans la recherche contemporaine, les expériences sensorielles sur les sites du pèlerinage des musulmans ont fait l'objet de peu d'études. Cet article examine l'importance de l'odorat dans les pratiques islamiques du pèlerinage des I^{er}/VII^e et II^e/VIII^e siècles. En m'appuyant sur des sources littéraires et matérielles, je reconstruis de nombreuses composantes de l'olfaction dans le pèlerinage à cette époque, y compris l'importante utilisation de parfums et d'encens dans les lieux de pèlerinage tels que la Ka'ba et le Dôme du Rocher, ainsi que la collecte et l'ingestion de matériaux parfumés par les pèlerins à partir de ces emplacements. Je soutiens ensuite que l'importance des aromates dans ces espaces sacrés est liée aux premières représentations islamiques sur la proximité du paradis avec ces sites de pèlerinage.

Mots clefs

pèlerinage, *ḥağğ*, Dôme du Rocher, Jérusalem, Mecque, odeur, parfum, encens, paradis

Within the study of early Islam, one of the most long-debated subjects has been the purpose and meaning of the Dome of the Rock, built on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in the 70s/690s.¹ Though much of this discussion has turned on interpretations of the Dome's architecture, iconography, and inscriptions, recent scholarship has incorporated an important additional feature of the building's early history: the extensive perfuming and incensing of the Foundation Stone (in Arabic, *Şahra*) and the interior of the building that was carried out to prepare the space for visitors. According to literary traditions likely dating from the late Umayyad period,² the Dome's attendants twice-weekly covered

- 1 The bibliography on this topic is huge. For a recent contribution with a useful overview of previous scholarship, see Milka Levy-Rubin, "Why Was the Dome of the Rock Built? A New Perspective on a Long-Discussed Question," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 80/3 (2017), p. 441-464.
- 2 On the dating of these traditions, see Meir Jacob Kister, "A Comment on the Antiquity of Traditions Praising Jerusalem," *The Jerusalem Cathedral*, 1 (1981), p. 185-186; Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship: Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage*, Leiden-New York-Köln, E.J. Brill ("Islamic History and Civilization," 8), 1995, p. 17-22; *id.*, "Why Did 'Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock? A Re-Examination of the Muslim Sources," in *Bayt*

Fashioning the Materiality of the Pilgrimage: The *hajj* Travelogue of Muḥammad Labīb al-Batanūnī

Ammeke Kateman

Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies,
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ammekekateman@hotmail.com

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAI
SONRA GELEN DOKÜMA.

Abstract

In 1911, the Egyptian travel writer Muḥammad Labīb al-Batanūnī published a highly informative account of his pilgrimage journey, *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya*. This article is interested in al-Batanūnī's representation (or fashioning) of the *hajj* and its materiality, as it reflects the conventions of his time and with which the author simultaneously hopes to shape the interpretations and practices of his contemporaries. Specifically, the article focuses on the way al-Batanūnī represents the objects and matters of the *hajj* (for example, Zemzem water) in opposition to interpretations and practices of his contemporaries within, as well as beyond, Islam.

Keywords

hajj – pilgrimage – Muḥammad Labīb al-Batanūnī – travel literature – *hajj* travelogue – Islamic reformism – Salafiyya – materiality

In 1911, the Egyptian travel writer Muḥammad Labīb al-Batanūnī (d. 1357/1938) published an elaborate account of his journey to and in the Hijāz, *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya* (The Hijāz journey).¹ This widely read and oft-referenced account relates the *hajj* of the year 1327h (December 1909), which he experienced and documented as an official travel writer in the entourage of the Egyptian

1 Muḥammad Labīb al-Batanūnī, *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, n.d. [1329/1911]).

khedive 'Abbās Ḥilmī II. The travelogue is heavy in its information load, containing elaborate descriptions of the history and contemporary social, urban, and sacred geographies of the places they visited, in addition to accounts of the *hajj* rituals and places and objects connected to the *hajj*.² It intersperses these passages with day-by-day entries on the journey al-Batanūnī, the khedive, and the rest of their travel group made – the places they visited, the people they met, with at times strikingly emotional descriptions of their feelings and sensations when praying at the Ka'ba or seeing the initial contours of Medina. Furthermore, it contains photos (often reprints), maps (both new and reprints), and tables.³

al-Batanūnī's travelogue to the Hijāz is a hybrid text, combining several genres and serving multiple purposes. This is not uncommon for an Arabic-Muslim *hajj* travelogue. It is also not uncommon for the genre of travelogues to mix several types of text. As a body of writing, therefore, travel literature seems most precisely defined by sharing "travel as an essential condition for its production" and is sometimes referred to as the "genre of genres".⁴

Perhaps because of this characteristic, travelogues – and this *hajj* account by al-Batanūnī, too – lend themselves to many forms of analysis.⁵ Handled

- 2 Hava Lazarus-Yafeh analysed al-Batanūnī's description of the Ka'ba and the Black Stone: Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Modern Muslim Attitudes towards the Ka'ba and the Hajj: The Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism in Islam", in *Some Religious Aspects of Islam: A Collection of Articles* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 121-22.
- 3 For its maps and images, it draws primarily on the (collected) *hajj* travelogues of the Egyptian general Muḥammad Ṣādiq Bāshā, *Daṭīl al-hajj li-l-wārid ilā Makka wa-l-Madīna min kull fajj* (Bulāq: al-Maṭba'a al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1313/1896).
- 4 Joan-Pau Rubiés and Francis Bacon, "Travel Writing as a Genre: Facts, Fictions and the Invention of a Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe", *Journeys. International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 1 (2000), 6 quoted in: Laila Hashem Abdel-Rahman El-Sayed, "Discourses on Emotions: Communities, Styles, and Selves in Early Modern Mediterranean Travel Books: Three Case Studies" (PhD Dissertation, University of Kent and Freie Universität Berlin, 2016), 32, <<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/56635/>>. For a discussion of the genre of Middle Eastern travelogues, see *Venturing Beyond Borders: Reflections on Genre, Function and Boundaries in Middle Eastern Travel Writing*, ed. Bekim Agai, Olcay Akyıldız, and Caspar Hillebrand (Würzburg: Ergon, 2013), part 3 ("Drawing Lines: Borders and Crossings in Genre").
- 5 The following discussion of the study of travel literature, mostly pertaining to Arabic and Middle Eastern travel literature, is based on: Richard Van Leeuwen, "Autobiography, Travelogue and Identity", in *Writing the Self. Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Robin Ostle, Ed de Moor, and Stefan Wild (London: Saqi Books, 1998), 27-29; Billie Melman, "The Middle East / Arabia: The Cradle of Islam," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105-21; Stephan Conermann, "Reiseberichte als Erzähltexte", in *Wenn einer eine Reise tut, hat er was zu erzählen: Präfiguration - Konfiguration - Refiguration in muslimischen Reiseberichten*, ed. Bekim Agai and Stephan Conermann (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2013), 7-27; *Venturing Beyond Borders*, ed. Agai et al.; El-Sayed, "Discourses on Emotions", chap. 1.

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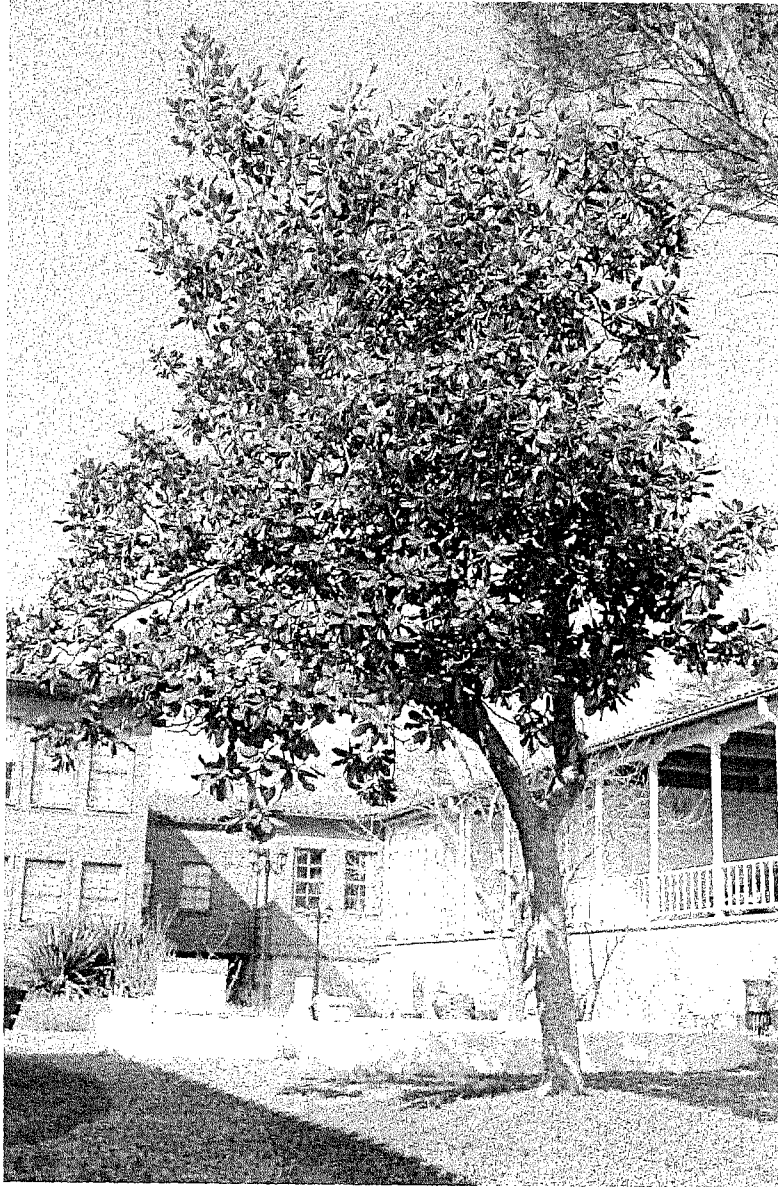


FIGURE 1. Sultantepe Özbekler Tekkesi, interior courtyard, 2018. Photograph by author.

SPIRITUAL SUBJECTS

*Central Asian Pilgrims and
the Ottoman Hajj
at the End of Empire*

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