

Call for Papers

The Materiality of Ziyāra in the Early Islamic World

Tombs, Shrines, Practices and Politics
(ca. 650-1300 CE)

27-29 October 2025

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz



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Marking graves, building tombs, and performing funeral rites are disapproved of—or outright forbidden—by certain segments of Islamic law, with the strictest interpretations labelling these practices as anti-Islamic innovations (*bida'*). Various prophetic *ḥadīths* in the canonical collections of the 3rd/9th century categorically prohibit plastering (*tajṣīṣ*), constructing (*binā'*), and inscribing (*kitāba*) on graves and firmly oppose visiting, praying at, or even sitting near them. The effects of this radically prohibitive stance have persisted in modern times as manifested in the systematic destruction of tombs and mausolea by the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia.

This notwithstanding, a substantial body of material and textual evidence attests to precisely the opposite: namely, that by at least the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries, marking, constructing, and visiting tombs was already firmly established as one of the most distinctive features of Islamic culture and practice. As Oleg Grabar notes, “one of the most characteristic buildings of Islamic architecture is, without doubt, the monumental tomb”—a phenomenon suggesting the pre-existence of a cultural and ritual dimension in early Islam centred around *ziyāra*, the visitation of holy places associated with revered figures and their legends. This challenges the common notion that a prohibitive Islamic orthodoxy concerning burials and commemoration was followed by a deviant innovation in the 3rd/9th-4th/10th centuries. Instead, it suggests that commemorative practices and prohibitive stances both emerged at an early stage, as coexisting and interdependent phenomena.

But how, when, and where did *ziyāra* originate, and what are the earliest material records of it?

In 1966, Grabar theorised that the original impetus for building — and visiting — mausolea stemmed between the 2nd/8th and the 3rd/9th century from Shī'ism, for which visitatio to the tombs of the Imams was—and remains—among the foremost pious obligations. Other scholars, such as Teresa Bernheimer and Christopher Taylor, have highlighted both the inter-communal nature of these visits—driven by a devotion to the Prophet's family that transcended sectarian boundaries—and the phenomenon of Sunni patronage of major Imami shrines during the medieval period. Although partly prompted by a shared reverence for the *ahl al-bayt*, such patronage often served specific political agendas among Sunni rulers. Indeed, the persistent involvement of governing powers in the history of these sites—through either sponsorship or attempted suppression—underscores their political significance. There is substantial evidence that interactions with tombs and their material settings—whether in a shrine, cemetery, building, or open space—played a pivotal role in shaping sectarian identities, fostering communal meaning, promoting group cohesion, and at times inciting unruly behaviours. Last but not least, the rise of *ziyāra* practices in the early Islamic period needs to be considered within the broader, cross-religious framework of memorialisation in Late Antique Western Asia and the Mediterranean. For instance, the commemoration of burials through epigraphy and built

structures, the veneration of saints, and pilgrimage to their tombs were integral aspects of the devotional life of Christian communities, which underscores the porous boundaries between religious groups and the shared ritual mechanisms behind the act of grave visitation. Evidence suggests that early Islamic societies did intersect and overlap with existing sacred landscapes, with sites of Christian pilgrimage becoming embedded within new Islamic religious and political topographies.

The emergence of ziyāra therefore raises a complex range of questions about the materiality and spatiality of death and burial in early Islam, as well as its social, ritual, and political dimension. Yet, our understanding of this practice, its material emergence, and its relationship with the socio-religious landscape of Late Antique Western Asia and the Mediterranean remains fragmented: on one hand, the archaeological record is often scarce and difficult to interpret, on the other, a divide persists between scholars who focus on material culture and those whose work is primarily text-based. New evidence, however, is continually coming to light and calls for interdisciplinary engagement that encompasses archaeology, material culture, architecture, epigraphy, a consideration of spatiality and spatial networks, and their connection to rituals.

It is with this aim that the present workshop—organised jointly by the ERC Horizon Starting Grant Project “Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shi‘i Community 700-900 CE” at Leiden University and the *Kunsthistorische Institut in Florenz*—seeks to foster dialogue among art and architectural historians, archaeologists, and historians/philologists who engage with materiality to address, from a variety of angles, the issue of the early crystallisation of ziyāra practices and the broader socio-political transformations reflected in evolving topographies of cemeteries and sacred landmarks in the early Islamic realm.

Submissions that engage with architectural, archaeological, and epigraphical evidence are particularly encouraged. This includes both new archaeological field reports and reassessments of established architectural, material, and archaeological data. The geographical scope covers the entire Islamicate world, with a strict chronological focus on periods before the 8th/14th century.

Specific questions include (but are not limited to):

- How did early Muslims negotiate the apparent textual prohibitions on marking and building over graves with the emergence of large-scale tomb architecture and commemorative practices?
- At what point, and in which regions, do we first find clear archaeological or architectural evidence of ziyāra-related activity?
- In what ways did the first Islamic commemorative buildings incorporate or adapt pre-Islamic local building traditions, aesthetics and topographies?
- To what extent did early Islamic sacred landscapes emerge through interaction with pre-existing Christian pilgrimage sites, and in what ways did ziyāra practices develop in relation to established Christian traditions of saint veneration?
- How do acts of erasure, translation, manipulation of the burial sites of revered figures serve the political agendas of rulers and elites?
- How did the spatial arrangement of cemeteries, tombs and shrines shape communal identity and social hierarchies? What role did these sites play in constructing a “sacred topography,” and how did that topography shift over time?
- Which ritual practices became materially inscribed in cemeteries, and how do we detect their traces in the archaeological record?
- What visual strategies were used to mark the sanctity of tombs, and how did these evolve across different regions or periods in the early Islamic era?

If you wish to participate, please submit a title, an abstract of no more than 500 words, and a CV to the following email address:
a.santi@hum.leidenuniv.nl

All submissions must be received no later than **May 18th, 2025**. Notification of acceptance will be sent by late June.

This workshop is organised jointly by Aila Santi, Postdoctoral Fellow on the ERC Horizon Starting Grant project “Embodied Imamate” at Leiden University, and Gerhard Wolf, Director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, in collaboration with Sinem Casale.



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