Encyclopædia Iranica

KARBALA
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Published: December 15, 2010
Last Updated: November 1, 2012

KARBALA

KARBALA (Karbalāʾ), a city in Iraq, situated about 90 km southwest of Baghdad. It is one of the four Shiʿite shrine cities (with Najaf, Kāẓemayn, and Sāmarrāʾ) in Iraq known in Shʿite Islam as *ʿatabāt-e ʿaliāt* or *ʿatabāt-e moqaddasa* (lit. sublime or sacred thresholds; see ʿATABĀT). The third Imam of the Shiʿites, Ḥosayn b. ʿAlī, and his half brother ʿAbbās are buried there.

The name Karbala apparently originated from the Akkadian word *qārballātu*, which referred to a sharp headgear, and changed into Kārbāla in Aramaic. Popular traditions claimed an Arabic origin deriving from Kur Bābel, that is, the environs of Bābel, or the word *karbalā*ʾ, which meant a foot imprint on soft ground (Yāqut, *Boldān* IV, p. 250; Kaya). The plain of Karbala was the site of the battle on 10 Moḥarram 61/10 October 680 between Imam Ḥosayn and the Omayyad army. Ḥosayn, with a party of seventy-two armed men and some women and children, was on his way from Medina to Kufa, whose inhabitants had invited him to lead a rebellion against the Omayyads. Before reaching Kufa, Ḥosayn was intercepted by an Omayyad force, and, following negotiations, he agreed to return to Medina. On 2 Moḥarram his party reached the plain of Karbala, where they were surrounded by another 4,000-strong Omayyad force sent by ʿObayd-Allāh b. Ziād, the governor of Kufa, and led by ʿOmar b. Saʿd b. Abi Waqqāṣ, who had been instructed not to allow Ḥosayn to proceed unless he would sign a pledge of allegiance to the caliph Yazid b. Moʿāwia. Ḥosayn sought to return to Medina without making the pledge, but ʿOmar b. Saʿd did not relent (Ṭabari, I, pp. 273-81; tr., XIX, pp. 65-74). On 10 Moḥarram, known in Shiʿism as ʿĀšurāʾ, the uneven battle took place.

Gradually all of Ḥosayn's able male companions were slaughtered, with Ḥosayn, according to Shiʿi tradition, the last one to be killed. The Ommayad army looted Ḥosayn's camp, decapitated the bodies of all his companions, and took prisoners all the women and children, among them Ḥosayn's surviving son ʿAlī, who became the fourth Shiʿite Imam, Zayn-al-ʿAbedin (Ṭabari, I, pp. 281-82, 292; tr., XIX, pp. 74-75, 87-88). The Karbala tragedy became the constitutive event of Shiʿism as a religion and the symbol of the victory of the oppressive majority over the righteous few, symbolizing whatever went wrong in Islamic history.

After the Omayyad troops had left, tribesmen from a nearby village buried Ḥosayn and ʿAbbās in the battlefield, and as early as 65/684-85 Ḥosayn's grave became a pilgrimage site for the Shiʿites. In the first decades following Ḥosayn's death, visitation of his tomb was precarious and was observed mainly by the members of the ʿAlid family. By the 9th century, the Shiʿite Imams were already attempting to institutionalize the practice of *ziārat al-ʿĀšurāʾ* (visitation on the 10 Moḥarram) and *ziārat al-arbaʿin* (visitation on the fortieth day of Ḥosayn's death; see ARBAʿIN) as a central element in Shiʿite identity. The early traditions attribute such attempts to Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq (d. 148/765, Nakash, 1995, p. 155). In promoting the visitations, the Imams exalted Karbala's position, attributing blessing and healing power to its soil and highlighting the future heavenly rewards that the visitors would gain. Henceforth, the pilgrimage, particularly to Karbala, aimed at preserving Shiʿite collective memory and group identity distinguished from that of the Sunnis. Since they were taken throughout the year, the visitations became a more popular destination among the Shiʿites.

Under the early ʿAbbasids, a tomb was built over Ḥosayn's grave, and its custodians were endowed by the pious benefactions of Omm Musā, mother of the caliph Mahdi (d. 158/764), who attempted to heal the rift between the ʿAbbasids and ʿAlids (Ṭabari, III, p. 752). In 236/850-51, the caliph al-Matawakkel (r. 232-47/847-61), who had adopted a strong anti-ʿAlid policy, had the tomb and its surrounding structures destroyed and prohibited the visitations to them. He also ordered that the area be irrigated and sown. However, after his death the graves were rebuilt and Ḥosayn's tomb restored (Ṭabari, III, p. 1407; Mostawfi, p. 32; tr., p. 39; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 166).

Under the the pro-ʿAlid Buyids (q.v.), Karbala enjoyed increasing reverence among the Shiʿites, for many of them replacing the more perilous Mecca and Medina as the goal of pilgrimage. In 369/979-80, the Buyid amir ʿAżod-al-Dawla

(r. 338-72/949-83) built a shrine over Ḥosayn's grave (Kabir, p. 64). Around it there grew up schools, hostels, and cemeteries, as burial in Karbala as a pious act became increasingly popular from the 3rd/9th century.

The Saljuq conquest of Baghdad in 447/1055 dealt a heavy blow to the Shiʿites, since the Saljuqs patronized the Sunni revival in the eastern Muslim world. Still, Solṭān Malekšāh visited Karbala in 479/1086, and ordered the repair of the town walls (Ebn al-Aṯir, X, p. 156).

The Il-khanid ruler, Ḡāzān Khan (r. 694-703/1295-1304) visited Karbala in 1303 and bestowed royal presents on Ḥosayn's shrine (Ḵalili, p. 87; Nöldeke, p. 40). The traveler Ebn Baṭṭuṭa, who visited Karbala in 1326-27, mentioned a large *madrasa* and a *zāwia* near the shrine to accommodate pilgrims, and he described the town as surrounded by date groves irrigated by the Euphrates River (Ebn Baṭṭuṭa, II, p. 99). As a center of Shiʿite learning, however, Karbala was overshadowed by Ḥella during these periods.

The rise of the Shiʿite Safavids in Iran in 1501 and the Ottoman conquest of Bagdad in 1533 transformed Iraq into a battle zone between the two rival empires. As the struggle for political supremacy was expressed in the context of the Sunni-Shiʿi strife, the ʿAtabāt were perceived as a prize by the Safavids, changing hands several times. The two brief periods of Safavid rule over the ʿAtabāt (1508-33 and 1622-38) resulted in construction in the shrines, particularly following the visitations of Shah Esmāʿil I and Shah Esmāʿil II in 1508 and 1529 respectively (ʿAzzāwi, III, p. 341, IV, p. 29). Under the Safavid rule, several thousand Persians, mostly merchants, settled in Karbala. Many of them fled to Iran following the second Ottoman conquest of the province in 1638, which resulted in the death of about 1,700 Persians. As part of his efforts to encourage specifically Shiʿite rituals, the Islamic jurist Moḥammad-Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1110/1699) emphasized visitations to the tombs of the Imams in Iraq, but overall the Safavids cultivated Isfahan and Mashad as centers of learning and pilgrimage (Amir Arjomand, pp. 168-69, 190; Donaldson, pp. 90, 93-94).

Following the Ottoman conquest of 1533 Sultan Solaymān Qānuni (r. 1520-66) ordered the repair of the Ḥosayniya Canal to bring water to Karbala from the Euphrates. Subsequent years of neglect resulted in a shortage of water in the city, and it was reported to be almost completely abandoned by pilgrims in the late 16th century. Following the building of a dam at the head of the Ḥosayniya Canal by the Ottoman governor Ḥasan Pāšā (1704-23), Karbala

enjoyed a steady supply of water, which partly explains why it (rather than Najaf) emerged as the most important Shiʿi center following the fall of the Safavids in 1722 (Nakash, 1994, pp. 21-22).

The Safavid collapse and subsequent Afghan persecutions and worsening conditions in Iran resulted in a massive emigration of Persian theologians to the ʿAtabāt. The failure of Nāder Shah Afšār (r. 1736-47) and Karim Khan Zand (r. 1760-79) to take over Iraq and the weakness of the Ottoman-Mamluk rule in Baghdad provided the ulama of the ʿAtabāt with sufficient latitude to build centers of study the without government interference. Increasing pilgrimage and the improved supply of water provided the necessary financial and physical infrastructure for learning. Altogether these developments, transformed Karbala into the leading Shiʿite center of learning (*ḥawza ʿelmiya*) during the 18th century and Iranized its ethnic composition and culture well into the mid-20th century.

The fall of the Safavids facilitated the reemergence, from the 1730s, of the Aḵbāriya as a major school in Twelver Shiʿism, with Karbala at its center under the leadership of Shaikh Yusof Baḥrāni (1695-1772). Although a few Oṣulis reportedly still lived in Karbala, they had to practice dissimulation in view of Aḵbāri intolerance. Āqā Sayyed Moḥammad-Bāqer Behbahāni (d. 1207/1793) was the first Shiʿite jurist to challenge Akhbarism in the 1760s. He promoted the Oṣuli approach in his writings, in building a circle of loyal disciples and lay followers, and finally in openly challenging Baḥrāni. Baḥrāni avoided open confrontation, and, with his death, the Oṣuliya regained the dominant status in Shiʿism that it has held ever since (Moʿallem Ḥabibābādi, I, pp. 222-25; Algar, pp. 33-36).

Funds sent from the Shiʿi kingdom of Awadh in India, known as Indian money (*pul-e hendī*), amounting to more than one million rupees during the years 1786-1844, became a major factor in Karbala's economy. During the first half of the 19th century the larger share of the Indian money was spent on public projects. Sayyed Mahdi Musawi Šahrastāni (d. 1216/1801-2) received Rs. 500,000 from Āṣaf-al-Dawla, the nawab of Awadh, for the construction of the Hendiya Canal in the Middle Euphrates to bring water to Najaf and Karbala. Likewise, Sayyed ʿAli Ṭabāṭabāʾi (d. 1231/1815-16) built the town wall for protection from Wahhābi raids (Litvak, 2001).

Renewed rivalry between the Ottomans and Iran following the rise of the Qajar dynasty (1796-1925), and Iranian claims to be the protector of the Shiʿite

interests in Iraq, aroused Ottoman apprehensions of the Shiʿites, particularly the ulama, as agents and allies of Iran. While the Ottomans never acknowledged Shiʿism as an official school and occasionally restricted some of their religious practices, they were more tolerant towards them, compared with Safavid and Qajar treatment of minorities. Concurrently, the renewed stability in Iran ensured a continuous flow of students and pilgrims to the holy sites in Iraq.

Mamluk policies towards the Shiʿites depended on the fluctuating weight of Ottoman-Iranian relations and their military powers. With the weakening of Mamluk power toward the end of the 18th century, Karbala hardly paid any taxes to Baghdad, but several years later the Mamluks managed to resume the collection of taxes. Visiting Karbala in 1803, Mirzā Abu Ṭāleb Khan observed that the cursing and disavowal (*sabb wa rafż*) of the first three caliphs is prevalent, while in Baghdad and Baṣra these practices were banned.

On 18 Ḏu'l-ḥejja 1215/21 April 1801, the anniversary of the event at Ḡadir Ḵomm celebrated by the Shiʿites, the Wahhābis of the Najd, who regarded the Shiʿites reverence of the Imams as polytheism, led by Shaikh ʿAbd-al-ʿAziz Saʿud, attacked Karbala. The Mamluk-Ottoman garrison fled, enabling the Wahhābis to loot the shrine and the city and kill about 5,000 people. Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah of Iran, while criticizing the Ottomans for their inability to confront the Wahhābis, offered Iranian troops to help defend the town and thereby consolidate his position as protector of the ʿAtabāt, but the Ottomans refused (Eʿteżād-al-Salṭana, pp. 98-100; Litvak, 1998, pp. 120-22). Instead, Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah sent 500 Baluchi families to settle in Karbala and defend it (ʿAzzāwi, VI, p. 217; Lorimer, IIA, p. 775; Mirzā Abu Ṭāleb Khan, p. 408).

Karbala's spiritual status made it the center of theological-religious disputes within Twelver Shiʿism between the dominant Oṣulis and emerging heterodox challenges. These struggles served to define more clearly the collective authority of the Oṣulis by posing them against a common rival and by setting clear, albeit narrower, boundaries of orthodoxy and pluralism in Shiʿism.

In the 1790s, the Oṣulis were alarmed by the success of the Neʿmatallāhi missionary Mir Maʿṣum-ʿAlišāh in converting several of their leading members. They excommunicated him as a heretic (*kāfer*) but allowed him to depart from Karbala safely. Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsāʾi (d. 1241/1826; q.v.), founder of the Šayḵi school of Shiʿism, who settled in Karbala in 1824, elicited a prolonged Oṣuli-Šayḵi dispute. He too was forced to leave, facing

excommunication and denunciations. His successor Sayyed Kāẓem Rašti (d. 1259/1843) turned Karbala into the center of Šayḵi propagation activity throughout Iran, transforming the Šayḵis into a sect within Shiʿism, thereby arousing hostility and efforts of excommunication among the Oṣulis (Litvak, 1998, pp. 58-63).

With weakening Mamluk rule during the second decade of the 19th century, local notables, primarily the *naqib-al-ašrāf* (head of the descendants of the Prophet), and the functionaries of the Shrines held the real power in Karbala, allied with and assisted by urban brigands. Karbala and Ḥella took advantage of the war between the governor Dāʾud Pāšā and Iran in 1241/1825-26 to cease paying taxes. Dāʾud Pāšā subdued Ḥella but was forced to accept a compromise mediated by the ulama, under which Karbala paid a lower tax but retained its semi-independent status until 1843. The town's real power brokers were the gangs, with the custodian of Imam Ḥosayn's shrine, ʿAbd-al-Wahhāb Ṭoʿma, serving as the titular governor tax-farmer. In 1842 there were 14 gangs in Karbala, amounting to 2,000-2,500 men, which extracted protection money from residents and pilgrims. The divisions between the Oṣulis and Šayḵis played into the hand of the gang leaders, who were regarded as crucial allies in the struggle. Consequently, the ulama themselves were often victims of the gangs (Litvak, 1998, pp. 135-37; Cole and Momen, pp. 116-18).

The Shiʿites, who resented Dāʾud Pāšā's harsh rule, welcomed the reassertion of direct Ottoman control over the Baghdad province in 1831. The new governor, ʿAli-Reżā Pāšā, who was a member of the Bektāšiya Sufi order, abolished restrictions on Shiʿite religious rites and various exorbitant fees levied on pilgrims to the ʿAtabāt. He failed, however, to impose his rule over Karbala, which retained its de facto autonomy (Litvak, 1998, pp. 135-36).

In 1843, the new Ottoman governor, Najib Pāšā, was determined to subdue Karbala as part of the centralizing reform (*ṭanẓimāt*) policy. When the gangs refused to accept an Ottoman garrison, Najib Pāšā took the city by force after a harsh siege, killing about 5,000 people and desecrating the shrines. The senior ulama did not participate in rebellion. While Sayyed Kāẓem Rašti sought to mediate between the gangs and the Ottomans, the leading Oṣuli *mojtahed*, Ebrāhim Qazvini (d. 1262/1846), left town to join the Ottoman side. Iran protested against the massacre but refrained from taking action (Litvak, 1998, pp. 139-40).

The Ottomans introduced new measures to impose tighter control over the town, although they did not interfere with the internal organizations of the Ḥawza. Karbala was made the center of an administrative unit (*sanjaq*) with a permanent gendarmerie garrison. New laws forced Iranian subjects to accept Ottoman nationality if they wished to hold real-estate property. The siege and massacre led many Iranian students and teachers to prefer Najaf, which emerged as the dominant center of learning and religious leadership in the Shiʿite world. The community of learning in Karbala remained much smaller, comprising several hundred students, compared with a few thousand in Najaf (Litvak, 1998, pp. 143, 150-57).

Economically, however, Karbala prospered with its population rising from about 20,000 in the early 1840s to about 85,000 inhabitants in 1911, of whom 60,000 were Iranians (Litvak, 1990, p. 41). Unlike the Ottoman and Iranian religious establishments, which relied mostly on pious endowments (*awqāf*) and governmental salaries or grants, the community of learning in Karbala relied on contributions from the believers as its main sources of income. The most famous example of this source was the Oudh Bequest set up by the king of Awadh, which began to operate in 1849. During the first 50 years of its operation, it channeled Rs.120,000 (£10,000) annually to Karbala and Najaf. Under agreement with the British, who administered the transfer of the funds, the money was to be distributed to the descendants of nine leading ulama families in Karbala, the custodians of the shrines, students (ca. 600), neighborhood shaikhs, *sayyed*s, and various categories of the poor. The Ṭabāṭabāʾi family used their control of the bequest to solidify their leadership position among the town's ulama, giving rise to continuous complaints of corruption by other ulama. In 1867 the British decided to allocate one-third of the funds to benefit poor Indian residents, to be managed by Nawab Eqbāl-al-Dawla of the Awadh ruling family. The new arrangement attracted to Karbala a sizeable community of Indian paupers living on charity (Government of India to Northcote, no. 131, 3 August 1867; Simla, L/P85/6/93; Tweedie to Thornton, Secretary of State to the Government of India Foreign Department, 12 March 1890, GIFD external proceedings, Baghdad, no. 123, P/3742; Kemball to Iqbal al-Dawla, 3 November 1867, GIFD, P/3743, 355; Appendix A in Tweedie to Secretary of the Government of India Foreign Department, no. 376, 3 July 1890).

A major source of economic activity in Karbala was the pilgrims, whose numbers steadily increased throughout the 19th century, and the extensive

burial industry of pious Shiʿites. Pilgrims' donations became a source of serious competition among the leading ulama, who were helped by their disciples in this purpose. Low-level ulama and students could earn money from pilgrims by undertaking to recite prayers on their behalf, praying at funerals, and arranging temporary marriages (*zawāj motʿa*).

In 1870 Nāṣer-al-Din Shah visited Karbala, receiving warm welcome by the mojtaheds and custodians of the shrines, reflecting their quietist approach in Iranian politics (Eʿtemād-al-Salṭana, III, pp. 1915-16; Amanat, p. 434). As part of the provincial reforms of the Ottoman governor Medḥat Pāšā (1869-71), Karbala had a new municipal council whose members were paid, since the previous arrangement had proven to be a source of corruption (Litvak, 1998, p. 159). Visiting Karbala in 1870, Medḥat Pāšā initiated the building of a new neighborhood to ease the density in living conditions. It was the first planned neighborhood in Iraq in many years. European travelers praised the new part of Karbala as an exception in that *pāšālik*, "presenting an almost European appearance" (Wardi, 1969, II, p. 239; Peters, p. 331; Cowper, p. 374).

Karbala did not play any significant role during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11. However, it rioted when the Committee of Union and Progress, which seized power in the Ottoman empire in 1908, abolished the exemption of madrasa students from military service, but to no avail.

During World War I Karbala enjoyed practical autonomy under the leadership of the Kamuna family, which established secret contacts with the British. When the Ottomans tried to assert direct control over the town in April 1916, the inhabitants drove them out, leaving the town practically independent. The British occupied Karbala in March 1917, and shortly afterwards they stripped the Kamuna family from all its positions on charges of spreading anti-British activities (Ḵalili, pp. 321-27).

The pro-constitutionalist mojtahed, Mirzā Moḥammad-Taqi Širāzi of Karbala (d. 1920), emerged as a major figure opposing British designs in Mesopotamia. He organized petitions and issued rulings (*fatwā*), endorsed by seventeen mojtaheds, calling for an independent Arab-Islamic Iraq ruled by a son of Šarif Ḥosyan of Mecca. Following the 1920 declaration of the Mandate over Iraq authorizing the British to run its administration, Širāzi declared service to the British administration to be unlawful and played a leading role in instigating the 1920 rebellion. His son was instrumental in organizing the secret society Ḥaras al-Esteqlāl, which served as a link between Shiʿi and Sunni

communities. The British responded forcefully to the rebellion, and in October 1920 Karbala surrendered, thereby ending the rebellion (Nakash, 1994, pp. 61-72).

With the establishment of Hashemite rule in Iraq under British tutelage, Karbala suffered the same political and economic marginalization of all the Shiʿites. The British initiated regular payment to the heads (*moḵtār*) of each of Karbala's seven quarters, turning them into government employees responsible for law and order. In subsequent years all religious and administrative posts would be held by Iraqi government employees. The mojtaheds struggled to retain their political influence by organizing, in April 1922, a conference in Karbala of ulama from Iraq and Iran to denounce the treaty with the British, and they demanded that half of all government posts, including the cabinet, be given to the Shiʿites. The following year the leading mojtaheds of Karbala, Najaf, and Kāẓemayn issued rulings requiring a boycott of the coming elections under Fayṣal's cabinet (Nakash, 1994, pp. 77-79).

The consolidation of Iran under Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) and the rise of Qom as the center of Shiʿite learning harmed Karbala's economy due to increasing Iranian restrictions on pilgrimage, combined with the sharp decline in corpse traffic and the flow of charities from Iran. Karbala's position as a leading desert market-town suffered with the rise of Samāwa and Zobayr. Unlike Kāẓemayn and Sāmarraʾ, Karbala failed to develop new sources of income and did not become integrated into the new state. With the rise of Baghdad as the center of political power and economic activity, and the growing splits within Shiʿite society, between the mojtaheds and tribal shaikhs and between the mojtaheds and younger people with modern education, Karbala and Najaf faced growing difficulties in commanding the focus of identity among the Iraqi Shiites. Consequently, Karbala suffered from the increasing emigration of its residents to Baghdad, with its population declining to about 25,000 souls in 1928. The censuses of 1947 and 1957 put its population at 44,150 and 60,294 inhabitants respectively (Nakash, 1994, pp. 98-100).

The Republican regime of ʿAbd-al-Karim Qāsem (1958-63) strove to improve the status of Iraq's Shiʿites, but his secularist policies prompted the Shiʿi ulama of the ʿAtabāt to organize the Ḥezb al-Daʿwa al-Eslāmiya in 1959. However, in 1961 more conservative mojtaheds from Karbala, led by Ayatollah Ḥasan Širāzi (assassinated in Beirut in 1980) and his elder brother, Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Širāzi, set up their own grouping. They argued that party activity must be led by a supreme mojtahed who enjoyed general authority (*welāya ʿāmma*),

rather than by lay figures vested with executive leadership, as was al-Daʿwa al-Eslāmiya's practice at the time. He also insisted on Karbala's historical revolutionary seniority over Najaf. Following his forced exile in 1970, the grouping was organized by his nephews Moḥammad-Taqi and Hādi Modarresi, who turned it into a more formal political movement, which in 1975 assumed the name Monaẓẓamāt al-ʿAmal al-Eslāmi (the Islamic Action Organization; Baram, 1990, pp. 95-125; Wiley, pp. 37, 55, 84; Batatu, 1981).

The seizure of power by the Baʿṯ Party on 14 July 1968 exacerbated Sunni-Shiʿi tensions due to its repressive nature, its avowed secularist policy, and continued exclusion of the Shiʿites from senior government ranks. Repressive measures against Shiʿite institutions and ulama led in February 1977 to mass riots in Karbala during the ʿĀšurāʾ commemorations. Karbala in particular suffered from the Baʿṯ policy of expelling to Iran thousands of Shiʿites "of Iranian extraction." As public protests only hardened the Baʿṯ measures, the Islamic Action Organization, alongside the Najaf-centered al-Daʿwa, resorted to armed attacks against the regime, which responded with increased repression (Bengio, pp. 1-14; Trip, 202-4).

Karbala played a leading role in the Shiʿite uprising of March 1991 following Iraq's defeat in the first Gulf War. However, the Baʿṯ regime defeated the rebels, who lacked internal organization and command structure and did not receive any external support from Iran and the United States. It inflicted heavy casualties and large-scale destruction upon the city, including the shelling of Imam Ḥosayn's shrine. During the 1990s, the regime rebuilt Karbala while employing harsh oppression and cooptation of the small clerical community and shrine officials. As part of the Shiʿi south, Karbala suffered disproportionately from the impact of the sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations, since the regime channeled most of its resources to the Sunni areas (Trip, pp. 255-56).

The rise of Iraq's Shiʿite to a dominant political position following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion benefited Karbala, although it suffered from occassional attacks by al-Qāʿeda terrorists. Exiled ulama returned from Iran, and Iran poured funds to renovate Karbala's mosques and shrines, in addition to building community infrastructure. Although Karbala did not emerge as a center of learning rivaling Qom or Najaf, it regained its position as the most frequented site of pilgrimage from the entire Shiʿi world.

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