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NAJAF

NAJAF, known in Arabic as al-Najaf al-Ašraf (the most noble Najaf), a town in southern Iraq and one of the most important pilgrimage destinations for the Shiʿites. ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb, the first Shiʿite Imam (and fourth Sunni caliph) is buried in the city along with graves attributed to Adam, Nuḥ (Noah), Hod, and Ṣāleḥ.

The history of Najaf is directly tied to the death of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb and his burial site, since the city rose to prominence due to the presence of his grave. The city has been renowned as a center of scholarship and Shiʿite religious authority and has been home to many illustrious religious scholars over the past thousand years, at times, rivaling Qom as a center of Shiʿite scholarship.

The present-day city of Najaf lies next to the older Islamic garrison city of Kufa, which was founded by the Muslim army, and the even more ancient Christian Lakhmid city of Ḥīra. Najaf is located on a raised plain that overlooks a valley called Baḥr al-Najaf (the Sea of Najaf), which is a fertile, agrarian region. The Arabic term *najaf* refers to a hill, a place where water cannot reach, which is attributed to the city's geographic situation on the top of an elevated plateau. In early times, Najaf was known as Ḡari, among its various names. Najaf's origins begin with the assassination of ʿAli b. Abi Ṭāleb in Kufa in 40/661 by the Kharijite ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān b. Moljam. Subsequently, ʿAli was purported to have been secretly buried in Najaf to avoid having his body exhumed and desecrated by his enemies (Faḵr-al-Din, p. 188).

Despite claims made by prominent Shiʿite scholars such as Abu Jaʿfar Kolayni

(d. 329/941), Shaikh Mofid (d. 413/1022), and Šarif al-Rażi (d. 406/1016), some Sunni scholars, such as Ebn Qotayba (d. 276/889), Ṭabari (d. 310/923), and Al-Ḵaṭib Bāḡdādi (d. 463/1071), have contested the location of his grave over the centuries. Before ʿAli was buried in Najaf, it had been a quiet area with a few Christian monasteries and tribal-based settlements (see Ṭorayḥi for a comprehensive overview of pre-Islamic Christian heritage sites in the Najaf region). In several archeological excavations (such as the Kokushikan University Expedition to Iraq, headed by Hido Fujii between 1986 to 1989; see Okada, p. 71; Kaʿbi 2012 and 2014), numerous monasteries and other Christian heritage sites have been found in and around the modern city of Najaf, including next to the runway of the Najaf airport.

Knowledge of the location of ʿAli's grave was kept from the general public after his death and was only known by his descendants and their close companions. Shiʿite hadiths narrate that most of the Imams performed pilgrimage to the grave. One popular legend found in the works of Shiʿite scholars and historians, such as Shaikh Mofid, claims that the first structure over ʿAli's grave was erected by the ʿAbbasid caliph, Hārun al-Rašid. Shiʿite hagiographical traditions narrate that Hārun al-Rashid was hunting for gazelle in the desert when he miraculously discovered ʿAli's hidden grave (Mostawfi, p. 32; tr., p. 39; Maḥbuba, p. 41). After Hārun al-Rašid allegedly built the first structure over ʿAli's grave, various rulers added to the building over several centuries and also adorned it with rich furnishings and decorations in commemoration of him.

After the location of ʿAli's grave became public, perhaps sometime in the ninth century, elite rulers, many of them Persian, patronized it and helped slowly transform Najaf into a transnational pilgrimage destination known for its sanctity and scholarship. Around 924, ʿAbd-Allāh Abu'l-Hayjā b. Ḥamdān (d. 317/929), the Hamdanid Shiʿite ruler of Mosul, to protect the tomb, built there a tall citadel (*heṣār*) and erected a lofty dome over the grave and adorned it with splendid hangings and precious carpets (Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 240). In 949, the Buyid monarch Fanā Ḵosrow ʿAżod-al-Dawla (r. 949-83) built the first proper shrine over ʿAli's grave, and he himself was buried there along with his sons, Bahāʾ-al-Dawla and Šaraf-al-Dawla. The mausoleum he built was still standing at the time of Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi (d. after 740/1340; Mostawfi, p. 32; tr., pp. 38-39). Ḥasan b. Fażl (d. ca. 414/1023-24), the governor of Iraq under the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Maʾmun, built the first defensive walls around the shrine in order to protect it from outside invaders (Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 860). The walls

did little to stop a mob of Sunni fanatics who, during an ongoing active Shiʿi-Sunni hostility in Baghdad, traveled from Baghdad in 443/1051 to set the shrine on fire (Ebn al-Aṯir, IX, pp. 575-77)—one of the numerous times that the tomb was attacked over the centuries.

Around the 11th century, Najaf became an established pilgrimage destination and also developed into a center for Shiʿite scholarship. In 447/1055, Abu Jaʿfar Shaikh Moḥammad b. Ḥasan Ṭusi, the leading Shiʿite theologian in Baghdad, fled Baghdad, seeking refuge from a fanatical Sunni mob that had set fire to his house and library. Ṭusi spent the rest of his life in Najaf, where he founded the first Islamic seminary (*ḥawza*) and continued teaching. Most historians of Najaf agree that Ṭusi was the founder of the first seminary in Najaf, which led to the prominence of Najaf in the Islamic world (Litvak, p. 16). Many famous explorers, poets, Sufis, and scholars from diverse sectarian affiliations passed through Najaf on their itineraries. Major rulers in the region made a point of visiting both Najaf and the shrine during their time in power and many of them patronized them to make the place more hospitable to pilgrims. Devout Shiʿites from areas extending from India to Iraq were buried in the Wādi al-Salām Cemetery, just outside the old city walls of Najaf.

In 1263, the Mongol governor of Baghdad constructed a canal to Najaf from the nearby Euphrates River to help combat the water shortage in the city. The canal was cleared of sediments by the order of Shah Esmāʿil Ṣafawi, who made pilgrimage to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala and bestowed gifts to both shrines after his conquest of Baghdad in 914/1508 (Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 860; Wāleh Eṣfahāni, pp. 171-72; Ḵᵛāndamir, IV, pp. 494-95). In 1354, the shrine burnt down, and it was rebuilt in 1358 (Maḥbuba, p. 46). Amir Timur attacked Baghdad in 1400 but refrained from attacking Najaf and Karbala. Timur performed pilgrimage to the two shrine cities and stayed for a short visit, during which he oversaw improvements to the shrines and bestowed tributes on them (ʿAzzāwi, p. 240). There is ample evidence that both Sunnis and Shiʿis patronized the shrine and performed pilgrimage.

Despite hostile relations between the Safavids and Ottomans, all of the shrine cities in Iraq, including Najaf, received generous patronage from the rulers and were developed into full-fledged shrine complexes, complete with gilded domes and minarets. With the rise of the Ottomans and their rule of Iraq from 1534 through 1920, a different dynamic began to take place in Najaf. The Sunni Ottomans controlled the country and often suppressed the Shiʿi populations of Iraq, whom they viewed as heterodox. At the same time, the

Ottomans held Imam ʿAli in reverence and also patronized his shrine out of respect for him. The Ottoman sultan Solaymān the Magnificent (r. 1520-66) visited the shrine in 941/1533-54 (Maḥbuba, p. 46; Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 860).

While the religious scholars of Najaf and guardians of the shrine were able to keep their autonomy during the Ottoman rule of Iraq, the Ottomans took harsh measures in dealing with revolts against their rule in the mid-nineteenth century (Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 860). At the same time, the Ottomans also patronized the shrine, donating expensive gifts to compete with Persian influence in the shrine cities of Iraq (Algar). Every major ruler from India to the Ottoman empire is said to have passed through Najaf to pay their respects to Imam ʿAli. Rulers used ʿAli's shrine as a strategic meeting place for religious and political leaders during the Ottoman era (Tucker). During the Ottoman era, a Baktāši Sufi lodge was attached to the exterior walls of ʿAli's shrine.

Despite receiving patronage from various rulers, Najaf remained an independent city, as the clergy received the *ḵoms* (one-fifth of an individual's income that is incumbent on Shiʿites to pay to their religious leader as religious tax) from their followers in many countries and did not have to rely on endowments (*waqf*). Furthermore, income generated from pilgrims as well as from burials in Wādi al-Salām ensured the city's economic independence (Litvak, p. 180). As a Shiʿite center of learning that housed many Persian and other foreign scholars, students, pilgrims, and merchants in the middle of Ottoman-controlled Iraq, Najaf's culture was a hybrid of Qajar Persian and Ottoman Iraqi societies (Litvak, p. 2).

Despite renovations sponsored by the Ottomans and Safavids, the city also suffered from attacks and neglect. The Portuguese traveler Pedro Texeira (d. 1641), who passed by Najaf in 1604, described the city and shrine as falling into a state of disrepair and also mentioned that pilgrimage had tapered off (Teixeira, pp. 47-48). Texeira's records of his travels through Najaf reveal that the city went through difficult times between the periods of patronage by the Safavids and Ottomans. The Safavids were generous patrons of the shrine in Najaf, and Shah Esmāʿil I (r. 1501-24) offered gifts to both the shrine and inhabitants of the city (Wāleh Eṣfahāni, pp. 171-72; Maher, p. 137). Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 1588-1629) rebuilt the entire shrine complex, including the interior shrine, courtyard, and dome. His son Shah Ṣafi I (r. 1629-42) expanded the complex, and Nāder Shah Afšār (r. 1736-47) renovated the shrine and paid for

the gilding of the minarets and dome in 1742-43 (Maḥbuba, p. 46; Marvi, III, pp. 924-30; Pārsādust, I, pp. 514-15).

Najaf was highly valued by the Safavids and when Shah ʿAbbās I built the ʿĀli Qāpu Palace in Isfahan, he used stones from ʿAli's former shrine to construct the threshold of the palace for blessings (Babayan, p. 233). The Safavids viewed the shah as a divinely appointed successor to the Imams, and subsequently the Imams were given royal attributes in Safavid rhetoric. Shah Ṭahmāsp I referred to Imam ʿAli as the King of Najaf (Šāh-e Najaf), and to himself as the "servant of ʿAli" (Rizvi, p. 77). Numerous Persian kings and princes over the years, such as Ażod-al-Dawla (d. 372/983), Shah ʿAbbās I (d. 1038/1629), and Āḡā Moḥammad Khan Qājār (d. 1212/1797), as well as many of the elite who visited the shrine cities of Iraq, were also buried in the shrine or in Wādi al-Salām Cemetery.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both Bedouin raiders and Wahhābi (an extremist faction of Sunni Islam) militants attacked Najaf on numerous occasions and spread fear among Persian pilgrims (Honigmann and Bosworth, p. 860). In 1801, militant Wahhābi forces attacked Najaf and kept it under siege for more than a year. They attacked the city again in 1806 and in 1810. The Wahhābis looted the treasure vault of the shrine and destroyed the dome. At the same time, internal hostility between opposing groups in Najaf vying to gain control over the city caused further unrest. Despite the attacks, in 1803, the Hindiya Canal was constructed by the Aważ (a part of Uttar Pradesh in India) chief minister Ḥasan-Reżā Khan, which provided the city with a steady source of water and quickly doubled its population (Nakash, 2003, pp. 28-31). With the generous patronage of both Shiʿite Indians and Qajar rulers, the situation in Najaf improved over the nineteenth century, pilgrimage picked up again, and Najaf became a significant city on the global level.

As Najaf became a stable city and grew in wealth and reputation, many Persian pilgrims would visit the Iraqi and Persian shrine cities before or after their Hajj pilgrimage. Pilgrims from various part of Iran have a long history of traveling to Najaf, as well as patronizing the shrine. Travel literature flourished during the reign of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96), due to his interest in the genre and his patronage of travel writers. Accordingly, there are numerous travel narratives from Persian pilgrims starting in the Qajar period (Farāhāni, p. xxiv). Three prominent Persian pilgrims to Najaf who left behind memoirs of their visits to the sacred city in the nineteenth century are

Mirzā Abu Ṭāleb Khan (d. 1806), ʿAbd-al-ʿAli Khan Adib-al-Molk (d. 1885), and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah. In his travel narrative, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah noted that the shrines and holy sites in Najaf were crowded with Persian pilgrims (Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, p. 37).

Najaf thrived due to Qajar patronage and became an important center of Islamic, particularly Shiʿi, studies and home to a large number of settlers, merchants, and pilgrims. At the end of the eighteenth century, the city hosted a small group of scholars, but by the end of the nineteenth century, their number had increased to several thousand scholars and their students. Karbala was primarily home to Persian scholars, but Najaf housed scholars of diverse nationalities from as far as India and Lebanon (Litvak, pp. 180-81). Many Persian scholars received their training and taught in the Ḥawza of Najaf. They became more involved in politics after the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1905-11 and revolution in the Ottoman empire in 1908 (Litvak, p. 188). The Ottomans maintained their control over Najaf until 1915, when two prominent Shiʿite tribal groups, the Zugurt and the Šumurt, took over the city and ruled it independently (Tabbaa, p. 41). Following the dissolution of the Ottoman empire after World War I, Najaf fell under British occupation in 1918. Iraqi scholars were inspired by the activist roles played by scholars in Iran, which led them to foment rebellion against the British occupation of Iraq. This led to the assassination of the British governor of Najaf, Captain Marshall, in 1918. This in turn led the British to counter by suppressing the local population and expelling some of the scholars, many of whom fled to Qom in Iran (Tabbaa, p. 42).

By the mid-twentieth century, Najaf experienced a serious decline in population and prosperity, as Baghdad took center stage in Iraqi politics. The city continued to rely on pilgrims. The, income generated from burials and alms, became stagnant during this time, and therefore Najaf could not compete with the capital (Nakash, 2003, p. 98). After the military coup of 1958, which firmly established the Baʿath Party in Iraq and with Ṣaddām Ḥosayn's rise to power in 1978, Shiʿites experienced further marginalization and oppression at the hands of the government. When the uprisings of 1991 spread throughout Iraq, including in Najaf, the Iraqi army responded by attacking Imam ʿAli's shrine and looting the treasure vault. Prominent Shiʿite scholars were hunted down and arrested, homes and hospitals were destroyed, and civilians were murdered (Tripp, pp. 246-47).

Between 1965 and 1978, Āyatallāh Rūḥ-Allāh Ḵomeynī lived in exile in Najaf.

Because of his strong network and loyal students and followers, Ḵomeynī was able to consolidate his religious and political authority. Although he maintained close ties with primarily Iranian followers and leaders, there is some evidence indicating that he also had much of a relationship with Najaf-trained religious leaders or Shiʿite political parties. Because of the precarious political environment, he maintained a low public profile and did not get involved in local politics (Corboz, pp. 246-47). Ḵomeyni, however, actively published and taught in Najaf, and it was there in 1970 when he developed and published on the then theoretical doctrine of *welāyat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist (Corboz, p. 222).

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), Najaf, along with Karbala, experienced intense scrutiny from the Iraqi regime under Ṣaddām Ḥosayn, due to the inhabitants' historical and familial connections to Iran. The Baʿath Party unsuccessfully attempted to find allies among the ayatollahs and other religious leaders, but they did manage to maintain informants within their communal circle (*ḥawza*). The Baʿth Party closely observed the activities of high-ranking religious leaders, such as Ayatollah Abu'l-Qāsem Ḵoʾi, and their representatives. The Baʿth Party was highly suspicious that, because many Shiʿite leaders had Persian ancestry and even Iranian citizenship, they were secretly aiding and abetting the Iranian government and forces (Kadhim, pp. 33-34). Other Shiʿite leaders, such as Ayatollah Moḥammad-Bāqer Ḥakim, were forced into exile in Iran, where the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was founded and brought together other Iraqi political organizations, including the Daʿwa Party from Najaf and the Mojāhedin Party led by the Hakim family. SCIRI actively campaigned against the Baʿthist regime in Iraq by calling for an armed struggle to model Iraq after the Iranian Islamic revolution (Halm, p. 126). Ḥakim also founded the Badr Brigade, the military wing of SCIRI, which was armed and led by the Iranian government to support Iraqi exiles to regain control in Iraq.

Most recently, Najaf was at the epicenter of the Iraq war in 2004, a protracted American-led conflict that started in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq by American forces. Coalition forces battled with the Shiʿite militia created by the Iraqi cleric Sayyed Moqtadā Ṣadr and called the Mahdi Army (Jayš al-Mahdi), who were hiding out in and around the shrine of Imam ʿAli and the nearby Wadi al-Salām cemetery. The shrine was the target of attacks by "unknown" sources, as it was said that the insurgents had stored their weapons in the shrine and in the nearby cemetery (see Patel for full account). Numerous

assassinations, car bombs, and attacks were carried out in Najaf, and prominent scholars and politicians were killed, such as Ayatollah Moḥammad-Bāqer Ḥakim by a bomb attack in 2003, (Tripp, p. 285).

With the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, shrines belonging to Sufi, Shiʿi, and other religious minority groups were attacked throughout northern Iraq. In June 2014, Abu Moḥammad ʿAdnāni, a spokesperson for the so-called ISIS (a faction grown out of the militant Sunni organization al-Qāʿeda), threatened that ISIS would attack Karbala and Najaf. He referred to Najaf, which is often called al-Najaf al-Ašraf, as al-Najaf al-Ašrak, or the most polytheistic Najaf. So far (i.e., in 2015), Najaf and Karbala have not yet been attacked by ISIS, but Shiʿi men and women are prepared to defend the cities in the event that it happens. The city is still recovering from the devastation of the Iraq war, which resulted in a fragmented infrastructure and extensive political corruption. A massive expansion of Imam ʿAlī's shrine and the extensive development of its tourism and civic infrastructure are signs of this recovery. Najaf is once again at the forefront as the most important source of Shiʿite religious authority outside of Iran. The city receives more than 10 million pilgrims annually from around the world as well as visiting dignitaries.

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