

## Paradise and Gehenna Keep Close Company in the Sanctuary of God

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*a review of the Mamilla Muslim Cemetery  
at Mamilla (Agron) and King David streets,  
part of an occasional series on Jerusalem  
cemeteries*

Just past the stairs leading up to the ancient Mamilla cemetery, a man wearing the blue uniform of a Jerusalem municipal worker sweeps the stone walkway. In his fifties, he hesitates when spoken to in Arabic.

“Are you a student?” he replies in Hebrew, gesturing to my notebook.

“No - a journalist,” I try again in Arabic. “Do the families of the dead still come here?”

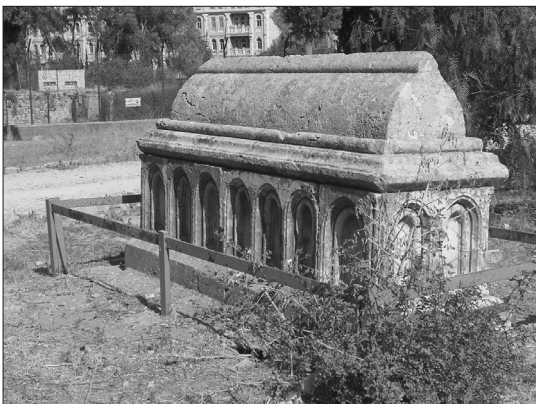
He eyes me suspiciously, beginning again in Hebrew before switching into his native Palestinian dialect. “Yes.” He is quiet,



*Writing worn by age on a stone hidden far from vandals under a tree. Source: C. Seitz.*



*Overgrowth shades a toppled gravestone. Source: C. Seitz.*



*An unmarked but protected grave marker near the rear of Mamilla cemetery. Source: C. Seitz.*

but sees I am still waiting. “A few. On weekends.”

The man shuffles away and I eye the bramble-covered hillside in frustration. Who will be able to tell me about this place?

But in a minute, he is back. “Don’t go over there,” he points to the corner of the graveyard behind the ancient water cistern. He insists. “It is dangerous there. Don’t go over there, OK?” Suddenly, the sunny, grassy cemetery takes on an ominous feel and I move nervously along the pathways of what most Israelis know as the dodgy, neglected south-eastern corner of Independence Park.

Very little can be said with certainty about what was once the largest Muslim cemetery in Palestine. Now marked by the mausoleum of Amir Aidughdi Kubaki (c. 1289 CE)<sup>1</sup> at the cemetery’s southern entrance, today’s burial ground of no more than 50 gravestones was once the resting place for an estimated 15,000 souls.<sup>2</sup>

A detailed account of legend and fact concerning the cemetery can be found in Aref al-Aref’s *al-Mufasil*<sup>3</sup>, which refers to Mamilla as “Ma’mān Allah” or “Sanctuary of God”. The origins of the name are disputed: some believe the name comes from the Arabic word for water [*ma*’], in reference to the nearby cistern, combined with the ancient place name “milla.” Others believe that Mamilla is the name of a woman saint for whom a Byzantine Church was constructed on the site. According to this legend, the church was destroyed by the Persians in 614 CE.

Al-Aref quotes the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Hassan as saying the site is “the burial place of the purest of the pure”. Those buried here, goes the tradition linked to Hassan, are “as if buried in the sky.” Nineteenth century traveler Al-Nabulsi described the cemetery as located in Jerusalem’s “hinterlands towards the west,

[and] the largest cemetery of two. Buried in it are many elites, nobles, martyrs and righteous and a large number of the *sahaba* [the Prophet's companions] and their followers."

Al-Nabulsi wrote, "It is said that its original name is Ma'man Illah and sometimes it was called Bab Illah [Gate to God]. It is also called 'Zeitun il-Milla'. Its name, according to the Jews, is Beit Milo and to the Christians, Babilla. But it is known to the common people as Mamilla."

Al-Aref makes the unlikely claim that the burial ground is the oldest in Jerusalem. He cites legend that the prophet Solomon was crowned king at the site in 1015 BCE. Too, the army of the Assyrian king Sanharib was to have camped here in 710 BCE and the victorious Persians were said to have thrown the bodies of local residents massacred during their 614 BCE occupation of the city. A large number of "mujahideen" were buried in the cemetery during the Islamic conquest ["al-Fatha"] in 636 CE. Mamilla was also where Salah al-Din al Ayyoubi was to have camped when he freed Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187 CE.

Finally, al-Aref lists 42 of the "sahaba, mujahideen and scholars" who are said to have been buried in the cemetery. The names are collected from a variety of written sources, and nearly all are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Footnotes included with the names hint at the importance of the cemetery and offer a picture of Jerusalem as a locus for Muslim scholarship and thought - a very different Jerusalem, one might add, than exists today. A few of interest are mentioned here, while the remainder can be found in the endnotes.<sup>4</sup>

*1. Islamic jurist Dia'ad-Din Abu Eisseh Muhammad al Hakari, advisor of Sultan Salah ad-Din, was captured by the Crusaders and Salah Ad-Din*

*paid a ransom 60,000 dinars for his return (585 H or 1289 CE)*

[...]

*5. Amir Ala' Eyd Aidughdi bin Abdullah al-Kubaki, known as a great horseman, it was said that he could place a coin in his stirrup and ride for hours with the coin remaining in place*

[...]

*9. Judge Sharaf ad-Din Munif, Jerusalem judge (714 H or 1313 CE)*

*10. Sheikh Sharaf ad-Din Eisseh, imam of Jerusalem (719 H or 1319 CE)*

*11. Idmar il-il Shaykhani, caretaker of "the two sanctuaries" (721 H or 1321 CE)*

*12. Sheikh il-Abed il-Zahed ["Servant of Simplicity"] Jilal ad-Din il-'Aqili, known as ibn Qalunsi. Sheikh il-Zahed was a writer, his grave was discovered in 1946, he served as caretaker of Qubaiyya in the Old City and had a zawiyya ["corner"] built for him in Egypt (722 H or 1322 CE)*

[...]

*20. Bahadr Akhwalist Tanshaq al-Madafriyyah, woman known for building the largest house in Jerusalem, which was later used as the Islamic orphan's school. Al-Madafriyyah was herself buried in Aqabat Tadqiyya in the Old City, however she constructed a mausoleum in Mamilla cemetery for her brother (789 H or 1387 CE)*

*21. Sheikh Abdullah il-Bustami, buried in a corner of Mamilla called "Zawiya Bustamiyya" where poor members of the Bustami tariqa, a Sufi order, were buried. No sign of the area remains, except for the grave of the tariqa's guide, Sheikh Ali al-Asfi al-Bustami,*



*who is buried in the northern part of Mamilla (794 H or 1391 CE)*

22. *Sheikh il-Imam il-Qidwa abu Bakr il-Shibani, a famous Sufi Sheikh (794 H or 1391 CE)*

23. *Sheikh Muhammad bin Abi Joz. Educator Ahmad Khalidi believes that the Wadi Joz area is named for this sheikh*

With a squinting of the eyes, then, standing at the foot of the slow slope that leads up into the graveyard, one can imagine the burial ground as it stood. Square stone monuments edged with intricate arabesque designs and set in loosely-arranged rows must have covered a hillside shaded by fruit trees. Al-Aref notes that the cemetery was once well beyond Jerusalem's borders. In Egypt in the medieval period, Muslim cemeteries were intentionally positioned inside wealthy neighbourhoods to allow easy visitation of ancestors, but Mamilla cemetery became central by virtue of Jerusalem's western growth. By 1927, Jerusalem had expanded so much since the first neighbourhoods were established outside the city walls in the mid-1800s that the Higher Muslim Council, led by Mufti Hajj Amin Husseini, decided to halt burials in Mamilla.<sup>5</sup> A British Mandate taxation map published just before the 1948 War shows the cemetery bordered on its northern side by a religiously mixed neighbourhood, flanked in the east by a Jewish neighbourhood, and bounded on its southern side by Mamilla Street full of restaurants, hotels, the American Consulate and the YMCA.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the no-longer-used Mamilla burial ground was a central municipal landmark and park.

But the cemetery today is only a faded shadow of this legend and stonework. One toppled gravestone near the entrance has the postmodern catchphrase "No Fear" scrawled across it in paint. To find many of the stones,

one must wade through lengths of knee-high grass and thorns. They are damaged, crumbling, and in the majority of cases, the inscriptions crudely but methodically cemented over.

A few signs of ancient history remain. Hidden far underneath a tree on the northern border of the cemetery lies a stone engraved with what appears to be a very old inscription. The swirls of Arabic script are so worn that they form only a vague design in the salt-and-pepper stone.

Just beyond it is a staircase leading to newly-christened Agron and Ben Sira streets. Ben Sira, a second century Jewish sage, is said to have admonished, "Fear not death, for it is your destiny." This land, too, is Islamic Waqf property commandeered by the Israeli municipality. Its history is still evident in the stone Oriental-style houses lining the road on the cemetery side and an arched pagoda in front of the presiding modern structure, the Israeli Government Press Office. A blue-suited guard sits in the shade of the pagoda. In this place, one might tell Ben Sira, the dead have been supplanted by the fears of the living.

Just left of that staircase is a group of graves, remarkable in the sophisticated ridge that marks the tiers of the stones. Beside them, a rusted drain pipe opens its mouth wide to belch runoff from the thoroughfare above.

Towards the fenced Mamilla pool, an ancient and now unused cistern, several gravesites bear signs of renovation and tending. A number are protected by a short rusting steel barrier. The edge of one tiered gravestone is decorated with the rounded pyramid design of a tiny repeating *mihrab*<sup>7</sup>. The stones are still mostly devoid of inscription, but these remain intact. One grave is characterized by two rounded pillars rising off a main rectangular stone. Another is distinguished by a single straight-backed pillar set into

a broad high stone platform. A carob tree shades the group.

Back along the path, further investigation yields one grave fitted with a new stone on top of its layer of cement. It is hidden by a vigorous and protective thorn bush that must be gingerly pushed aside to read the lichen-covered inscription:

*This is the tomb of he who was most pious...the One [Aw'had] of virtue and morality. He was wept for by the eyes of glory when he met His Maker. Please God, keep his resting place guarded, for he has chosen God as his companion...He has become hasiran [?]. 1339 H.*

The cemetery is bordered by a parking lot on one side, and the rest of Independence Park on the other. Formerly an expanse of the Mamilla burial ground, the park beyond is flush with trimmed green grass, shaded walkways and signposts marking caves where eighth century Fatimid conquerors were said to have thrown the bodies of Christians they killed when occupying the city.<sup>8</sup> On the other side of Independence Park is the Hilton Hotel, also constructed on Waqf land.

But it is not simply that the unused graveyard has been built over and replaced by new structures. The gradual erasure of this Muslim/Palestinian religio-political site in the service of the Jewish/Israeli nationalist narrative is deafening in the absence it imposes.<sup>9</sup>

The graveyard is blandly marked on Israeli maps as 'Kikhar Mekhes', or 'Shelter Plaza'. Thousands of graves, some of them of the city's Muslim conquerors, have been ploughed under and renamed in service of the celebration of Israeli sovereignty. The Muslim dead themselves have been rendered nameless, for the most part, and official state markers have been designated

for the graves of Muslim victims.

By 2007, that absence will scream even louder. California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the repentant son of a Nazi Party member, travelled to Israel in May this year to break ground for a museum sponsored by the Simon Wiesenthal Center. The new "Museum of Tolerance" encompassing a museum, children's museum, theatre, international conference centre, library, gallery for special exhibitions, lecture halls and gardens is slated to be built on the lands of the Islamic Waqf, just on the edge of these few remaining disappearing graves.

The museum complex will extend over three acres to both ends of Hillel Street, to join up with the massive renovation project that has transformed the area southwest of Jaffa Gate into luxury apartments and hotels. The Museum of Tolerance project is controversial, as Israelis question the wisdom of spending \$150 million on a museum in a country suffering a dearth of tourists. For that reason, the plans have been kept a closely guarded secret.<sup>10</sup>

"The idea of tolerance is a great idea because it is a Jewish one," said Labour Party leader Shimon Peres of the project. "You cannot be tolerant unless you are alive. Dead people cannot be tolerant, and the first human right is to remain alive. This city is fighting in order to keep us alive."<sup>11</sup> As such, monuments to the dead representing the continuity of Muslim life in the city will be overwritten by state-of-the-art monuments to the Jewish living. A futuristic representation of 'coexistence' will be projected onto the textured remains of a multi-ethnic past.

Rounding the turn behind the wide stone pool, I near that area of the park that I was so vigorously warned away from. Next to a small rundown shack, there is a man waiting nervously, talking on his cell phone. I am not eager to disturb any illicit activity, but

on the other side of the structure I spy the grandest and clearly best maintained of all the remaining gravestones. The grass nearby is trimmed, and the replaced gravestone appears so neatly cut as to have been engraved with modern machinery. Drawing closer, I examine the inscription braced on both sides by elegant long feathers cut into the stone.

*Fatiha*

*Visit the resting place of a moon that has left us. All have acknowledged his virtues. Time has claimed him in the zenith of his youth, for he was known for his virtues and good deeds, which no one denies. Hassan al-Nashashibi, he who has fulfilled all his finest deeds and never deviated. His Lord [Mawlahu] has called him...[to his side] and placed him in the most sublime of environments. 1421 H.<sup>12</sup>*

Listening for the sound of approaching feet, I quickly photograph the inscription before beating a hasty retreat. It is not the dead who haunt this cemetery, but the fears and vices of the living.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This corner of the graveyard is also referred to as “Zawiyya Kubakiyye” [Kubakiyye Corner], after the amir. Kubaki rose from slavery in Syria to become governor of Syria and Aleppo before being exiled by a Mamluk sultan to Jerusalem, where he died. (*The Holy Land*, Oxford Archeological Guides: Oxford, 1998, 146).

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Killgore, “Vignettes From Jerusalem the Golden”, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (April/May, 1997): 34-35.

<sup>3</sup> (Maaref Press: Jerusalem, 1992) 169.

<sup>4</sup> [...]

2. Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ibrahim bin Ahmad il-Qreishih il-Hashemi from Andalusia (599 H)

3. Chief Justice [Qadi il-Quda'] Barhan ad-Din ibn Jamai' (675 H or 1276 CE)

4. Kamal ibn Abi Sharif

[...]

6. Al-Muqir il-A'li [political title] Omar bin Ibrahim bin Uthman bin 'Alm il-Wasiti (683 H or 1285 CE)

7. Al-Amir Salah ad-Din Hamad al-Zadmir il-Salhadar il-Nasiri (697 H or 1297 CE)

8. Ibrahim bin Muhammad (708 H or 1308)

[...]

13. Sheikh Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ibrahim il-Masri (d. 723 or 1323 CE)

14. Hajj 'Alaywan bin Ibrahim il-Rendi

15. Shihab ad-Din bin Jbarah il-Mqdasi, knowledgeable in the Hanbali school (728 H or 1327 CE)

16. Sheikh Husam Din

17. Chief Justice 'Imad ad-Din il-Qureishi (734 H or 1333 CE), annotated the religious books of al-Muslim

18. Sheikh Abu Abdullah il-Hindi (773 H or 1371 CE)

19. Sheikh Taqi ad-Din Abu il-Fida Ismail al-Qarqashandi (778 H or 1376 CE)

[...]

24. Sheikh il-Islam Shihab ad-Din Abulabbas Ahmad il-Masri il-Maqdsi, known as “Ibn il-Ha'im”, professor in the Salahiyya school (815 H or 1412 CE)

25. Chief Justice Shams ad-Din al-Khalidi al-Dari (847 H or 1423 CE)

26. Sheikh il-Islam Abu Abdullah Muhammad il-Razi, a professor in the Salahiyya school. (829 H or 1425 CE)

27. Qadi and sheikh Shihab ad-Din Abulabbas al-Omawi al-Masri, known as “Ibn al-Mijamara”, also professor in the Salahiyya school. (844 H or 1440 CE)

28. Sheikh Muhammad Foulad, responsible for carrying the keys of the Dome of the Rock to Timor [as a symbol of the region's conversion to Islam] (844 H or 1440 CE)

29. Al-Najm bin Shihab ad-Din (844 H or 1440 CE)

30. Abu Hassan al-Badri (844 H or 1440 CE)

31. Sheikh Shihab ad-Din Ahmad bin Arsalan (844 H or 1440 CE)

32. Imam Abu Abdullah il-Dhar'i (848 H or 1444 CE), authored Islamic text *Crème of the*

Scholars and explicated the hadith collections of Abu Dawoud and Bukhari

33. Qadi Burhan ad-Din Abu Ishaq il-Khazraji, known as "Ibn Nusseibeh" (852 H or 1448 CE)

34. Chief Justice Taqi' ad-Din Abu Bakri il-Rasasi

35. Amir Rukun ad-Din Mankours il-Jashnakir

36. Sheikh Shihab ad-Din Ahmad, known as "Ibn il Ha'im", sheikh in the study of mathematic sciences in the East

37. Qadi Ami ad-Din Abdel Rahman bin Shams ad-Din il-Khalidi (856 H or 1452 CE)

38. Storyteller 'Imad Abu il Fida Ismail bin Burham ad-Din il-Qarqashnadi (761 H or 1452 CE)

39. Sheikh 'Othman il-Hattab il-Masri from Egypt (892 H or 1486 CE)

40. Chief Justice Khair ad-Din Abu il-Khair, imam of the Gaza holy sites, qadi in Jerusalem and professor in the Mathamiyya school (894 H or 1488 CE)

41. Sheikh Ahmad bin Ali bin Ias il-Dajani, grandfather of the Dajaniyya family, said Prophet Muhammad told him in a dream to teach the rules of Arabic (969 H or 1561 CE)

42. Najmi ad-Din il-Khairi il-Ramli bin Khair ad-Din il-Ramli, mufti of the Hanafi school in Jerusalem

Note: As this edition was going to press, Rochelle Davis introduced me to a reference from Muhammed Omar Hamadeh's *Masu' A'lam Filistin*, which says and Amneh Ismail al-Qalqashandi (740-809 H./ 1339-1406 CE), a female scholar of hadith, was also buried in the Qalandariya Zawiya in Mamilla next to her father.

<sup>5</sup> al-Aref.

<sup>6</sup> Salim Tamari, *Jerusalem 1948*, (Jerusalem, IJS: 2002), attached map.

<sup>7</sup> The arched niche in every mosque that indicates the direction of prayer.

<sup>8</sup> In most tourism materials, Mamilla cemetery is referred to in conjunction with this tradition, which is of course politically useful for an Israeli narrative that asserts the religious intolerance of Islam. Proof of the tradition is offered via a large number of bones that were discovered within the caves. Members of the Israeli Antiquities Authority have even studied the 'epigenetic traits' of the bones found in these caves, finding that they differ from those of Jews and 'nomadic

Arabs' and thus asserting that they are Christian. (See Yossi Nagar, Cecil Taitz & Ronny Reich, "What can we make of these fragments? Excavation at Mamilla Cave, Byzantine period, Jerusalem," *International Journal of Osteoarchaeology* (Feb 1999): 29-38) Many scientists question the validity of such studies, as they are based on the well-debunked thesis that race (in this case elided with religion) actually exists as a scientific category.

<sup>9</sup> Recent efforts to revive mosques inside Israel demonstrate how these sites are viewed by both Palestinians and Israelis as repositories of history, and specific futures. In "A mosque by any other name is still... a museum," *Ha'aretz* (29 March, 2001) author Ori Nir records the comments of a Bir Saba engineer. "I think that those who are demanding that the place be turned into a mosque again want to revive the past rather than look forward to the future," he says. "I don't know much about their religion, but when I go to Rahat [a Bedouin town in the Negev], I don't look for a synagogue to pray in. Everyone prays where he lives, and the Muslims of Bir Sheva have not asked to build a mosque or an Arab school."

<sup>10</sup> Esther Zandberg, "The next architectural oddity: the Museum of Tolerance", *Ha'aretz* (12 July, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Simon Wiesenthal Center press release, "Changing the face of Jerusalem forever: plans unveiled for new \$150 million Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in heart of Jerusalem," 26 November, 2002, source: [http://www.wiesenthal.org/social/press/pr\\_item.cfm?ItemID=6818](http://www.wiesenthal.org/social/press/pr_item.cfm?ItemID=6818), captured 12 July, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Wadia' Aweis for assistance in reading photographed inscriptions from Mamilla.