The Materiality of Ziyāra (Florence/online, 27-29 Oct 25)

Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattai, Florence / online, Oct 27–29, 2025

Natalie Arrowsmith

"The Materiality of Ziyāra in the Early Islamic World: Tombs, Shrines, Practices and Politics (ca. 650-1300 CE)" – workshop organized by Aila Santi and Sinem Casale.

Supported by the ERC Horizon Starting Grant Project “Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shi i Community 700-900 CE”, grant n. 101077946 and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (KHI) – Max-Planck-Institut.

As Oleg Grabar noted, “one of the most characteristic buildings of Islamic architecture is, without doubt, the monumental tomb.” Marking graves, building tombs, and performing funeral rites are nevertheless disapproved of – or outright forbidden – by certain segments of Islamic law, with the strictest interpretations labelling these practices as anti-Islamic innovations (bida).
This notwithstanding, a substantial body of material and textual evidence attests that by at least the 10th century CE, the marking, construction, and visitation of tombs had already become firmly established as one of the most distinctive features of Islamic culture and practice, challenging the common notion that a prohibitive Islamic orthodoxy was simply followed by a later deviant innovation.

Commemorative practices and prohibitive stances around ziyāra – the visitation of holy places associated with revered figures and their legends – emerged in fact 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? Whereas an earlier generation of scholars have associated the origins of ziyāra to the rise of Shīism (Grabar 1966), others have highlighted both the inter-communal nature of these visits, and the Sunni patronage and protection of major Imami shrines during the medieval period and beyond (Bernheimer 2013; Taylor 1992). Meanwhile, patronage of and governance over tombs held considerable significance for many rulers, both Sunni or Shīi. In fact, interactions with tombs and their material settings played a pivotal role in shaping sectarian identities, fostering communal meaning, promoting group cohesion, and at times inciting unruly behaviours.

This workshop suggests that in addition to sectarian history and politics, 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. Although our knowledge on the topic remains fragmented, new evidence calls for interdisciplinary engagement. In this event – organised jointly by the ERC Horizon Starting Grant Project “Embodied Imamate: Mapping the Development of the Early Shii Community 700-900 CE” at Leiden University and the Kun-

sthistorische Institut in Florenz – organisers seek to foster dialogue among art and architectural historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, philologists, and historians who engage with the built environment, materiality, space, epigraphy, and ritual to explore the early crystallisation of ziyāra practices and the broader socio-political transformations reflected in evolving topographies of cemeteries and sacred landmarks in early Islam realm.

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PROGRAM:

MONDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2025

14:30-14:45
Opening Remarks by Gerhard Wolf (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz), Aila Santi (Leiden University) and Sinem Casale (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz)

Panel 1 – The Materiality of Ziyāra in the Shi□ī World
Chair: Edmund Hayes (Leiden University)

14:45-15:15 Zahra M. Jiwan (Columbia University)
The Early Ziyara of Twelfth Imam's Envoys in Baghdad: A Ritual-Architectural Process of Canonizing Authority

15:15-15:45 Reza Daftarian (Courtauld Institute of Art – University of London)
The Radiance of Resilience: Ziyarat and the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mongol-Ilkhanid Iran

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2025

Panel 2 – Building Remembrance (I): Concepts, Forms, and Materiality in Islamic Commemorative and Funerary Practice
Chair: Sinem Casale (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz)

10:30-11:00 Amelia Blundo (Sapienza University of Rome)
Rules and Models of Commemorative Buildings in the Dar al-Islam in the Early Centuries: A Reflection from the Case Study of the Aswan Necropolis

11:00-11:30 Simon O'Meara (SOAS University of London)
The Prophet's Grave and the Question of Sub-floor Domestic Burial in Early Islam

11:00-11:30 Jahfar Shareef Pokkanali (University of Bonn)
Early Islamic Funerary Sites Along the Southern Indian Littorals: Materialities, Forms, and Ornaments

11:30 Coffee Break

Panel 3 – Building Remembrance (II): Epigraphy, Ornaments, and Visuality in Islamic Commemorative and Funerary Practice
Chair: Aila Santi (Leiden University)

12:00-12:30 Teresa Bernheimer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich)
Building Blocks of Memory: Early Islamic Tombstones and the Material Practice of Ziyara

12:30-13:00 Alka Patel (The University of California & Aix-Marseille Université/La3M)
Carving Monuments: Funerary Innovations in the Eastern Persianate Worlds, XI-XIII Centuries

13:00 Break

Panel 4 – The Materiality of Death and Commemoration in Islamic Archaeology: Reinterpreted Evidence and New Finds
Chair: Aila Santi (Leiden University)

14:30-15:00 Thomas Leisten (Strata Heritage Consulting)
On the Road of Pain and Sorrow: Excavating the Mashhad al-Tirh in Balis, Syria

15:00-15:30 Andrea L. Corsi (Orient Abteilung, DAI Berlin) & Richard P. McClary (University of York)
Approaches to Early Islamic Funerary Practices: the Siraf Necropolis and Beyond

15:30-16:00 Amanda Antonelli (Independent)
Rediscovering Rasulid Funerary Culture: the Study of the Cemetery of al-Ribat (Dhofar, Sultanate of Oman)

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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2025

Panel 5 – Landscapes of Memory (I): Inherited Sacred Geographies and the Emergence of Islamic Ziyāra
Chair: Leone Pecorini (Leiden University)

10:00-10:30 Kyle Longworth (Leiden University)
Caliphs ad Sanctos?: Pre-Islamic Christian Saints and the Gravesites of the Umayyad Caliphs ‘Umar II (d. 101/720) and Hisham (d. 125/743)

10:30-11:00 Simon Pierre (Ifpo Beirut and Orient et Méditerranée, Paris)
Before Muslim Saints. Arab Visitation and Almsgiving to Christian Holy Shrines (1st-2nd Century AH)

11:00 Coffee Break

Panel 6 – Landscapes of Memory (II): Spiritual Topography, Place Making and Death in the Early Islamic world
Chair: Adam Ramadhan (Leiden University)

11:30-12:00 Finn Lindo-Dunn (Leiden University)
Entombing Identity: Landscape, Memory, and the Tomb of ‘Uqba ibn Nafi in Medieval North Africa

12:00-12:30 Adam Bursi (Cornell University)
“Do Not Skip Going to the Tombs of the Martyrs”: Early Pilgrimage to Uhud and Its Discontents

12:30-13:00 Petra Sijpesteijn (Leiden University)
Landmarks of Change: Tombs and Ritual in Early Islamic Egyptian Papyri

13:00 Break

Panel 7 – Landscapes of Memory (III): Politics of Burial in the Medieval Islamic West

Chair: Zahra Azhar (Leiden University)

14:30-15:00 Bilal Sarr (University of Granada)
Sanctity and Rawdas in Southeastern al-Andalus: Rituals, Visits, and Materiality

15:00-15:30 Peter Tamas Nagy (Qatar Museums Authority)
Dynastic Forefathers in Medieval Morocco: Establishing Tombs, Commemoration, and Ziyara

15:30 Coffee Break

16:00-17:00 Closing remarks by Avinoam Shalem (Columbia University) and Hugh Kennedy (SOAS University of London) and Round Table Discussion

Chair: Aila Santi (Leiden University)

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This will be a hybrid event.

Venue:
Palazzo Grifoni Budini Gattai
Via dei Servi 51
50122 Firenze, Italia

To participate online please register in advance via Zoom:
https://eu02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/bMENDyMLQwu9wpEpe_bTDw#/registration
After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

Reference:
CONF: The Materiality of Ziyāra (Florence/online, 27-29 Oct 25). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 18, 2025 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/50932>.