REMEMBERING AND IMAGINING THE INVASION: A THREAT TO THE MUSLIM SACRED SPACES IN ARABIC FOLK EPICS

OLEG SOKOLOV*

Abstract

The inclusion of narratives about the struggle for key Islamic sacred spaces such as Jerusalem and Mecca in tribal stories and tales, which formed the basis for folk epics, indicates the great importance of the concept of protecting these holy places in medieval Arab folk culture and can be seen as a repercussion of the Crusades. In these epics, when a Christian leader is said to be "making a pilgrimage" to Jerusalem, he typically brings a large army and often states his intention to conquer this sacred site. The epics also focus on the importance of Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for Christians. It is important to note that prior to the Crusades, there was almost no precedent for Christian capture of the significant Muslim holy sites. However, during the Crusades Jerusalem, with its sacred shrines, was captured by Western European Christian forces and the Crusaders later posed a military threat against Mecca and Medina. These historical developments eventually became imprinted in the folk imagination of the peoples of the Near East.

Introduction: Scholarly Debate

Sacred space as such is a common subject of research by cultural anthropologists and scholars of religion, starting with the works of Mircea Eliade, who theoretically substantiated the cultural and social importance of

* Department of Arabic Philology, Faculty of Asian and African Studies, St. Petersburg State University.

the spatial manifestation of the sacred.[1] The processes of endowing space with sacredness and depriving it of this status, along with the mechanisms of re-sacralization, constitute an important element in the creation and maintenance of a group (local, national or religious) identity. These mechanisms imply the division of space, both real and imaginary, into "us" and "them", along with the "sacred" and "profane", being utilized as weapons in confrontations between imagined communities. In these processes, an important role is played not only by specific ritual actions, but also by historical and quasi-historical narratives that form discourses associated with sacred places. The complexity of these processes determines the importance of studying the perception of various sacred spaces by different communities.

For many centuries, the history of the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula was marked by rivalry for control over sacred spaces between representatives of various faiths, and this confrontation continues to this day.[2] Most previous studies concerning sacred spaces in the Levant are either devoted to episodes of the sacralization of space in the early Islamic period, following the Arab conquest of Palestine (seventh to ninth centuries AD),[3] or to the contemporary period with an emphasis on the role of sacred spaces in the Arab-Israeli conflict.[4]

The study of the perception of sacred spaces in the cultural memory of the inhabitants of the region will provide a better understanding of the processes of formation of the identities of the modern inhabitants of the Levant and adjacent regions. In this context it is crucial to note that most of the previous works analyzing the existence of sacred spaces in this region are primarily

[1] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1987), 20-23.

[2] Benjamin Z. Kedar, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (eds.), *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land. Proceedings of the International Conference in Memory of Joshua Prawer* (London: McMillan Press Ltd, 1998).

[3] See, Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship - Holy Places, Ceremonies, Pilgrimage* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1995); Jacob Lassner, *Medieval Jerusalem: Forging an Islamic city in spaces sacred to Christians and Jews* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

[4] See, Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Reiter (eds.), *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine - Religion and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2012); Wendy Pullan, Maximilian Sternberg, Lefkos Kyriacou, *The Struggle for Jerusalem's Holy Places* (London: Routledge, 2014); Yitzhak Reiter, *Contested Holy Places in Israel-Palestine: Sharing and Conflict Resolution* (London: Routledge, 2017).

devoted to social and historical aspects and do not pay due attention to the role of semiotics and imagery in shaping the identities of these communities. The majority of these studies belong to the category of so-called case-studies dedicated to the history and culture of the Holy Land in certain historical periods.[5]

One of the most important periods in the history of the Levant, marked by the struggle for sacred space and its re-sacralization, was the era of the Crusades. There are a number of studies that analyze the perception of sacralization and re-sacralization of space and the struggles over it both in the works of scholars who were contemporaries of the Crusades and in those of Muslim historians and theologians who lived after the end of the Crusades. However, the memory of non-elite groups about this aspect of the Crusades remains understudied. Furthermore, the studies on the identity of the Arab population of the Levant hardly touch on the topics of the sacralization of space and the stigmatization of its loss in the folk culture of the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Period.[6] For such reasons, a number of researchers consider it important to make use of the medieval and early modern Arabic folk epics to study this issue.

Carole Hillenbrand, in her study of the Muslim perspectives of the Crusades, emphasizes the importance of such a view from below:

> As in other areas of medieval history, a major gap in our knowledge of the social aspects of the Crusades is the perspective of the ordinary people, of course, their lives rarely come under the scrutiny of the chroniclers, who are almost exclusively concerned with the narrowly defined ruling echelons of society. It is therefore necessary to investigate other spheres of Islamic culture in order to try to find more information about how the ordinary people felt about the Crusades. [..]. What is clear, however, is that this literature is a vast and largely untapped source of popular

[5] See, Oded Peri, *Christianity under Islam in Jerusalem: The Question of the Holy Sites in Early Ottoman Times* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Vincent Lemire, *Jerusalem 1900: The Holy City in the Age of Possibilities*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[6] See, Haim Gerber, *Remembering and Imagining Palestine: Identity and Nationalism from the Crusades to the Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Meir Litvak, *Palestinian Collective Memory and National Identity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

> attitudes, beliefs and stories which helped to create Muslim stereotypes of the Franks.[7]

The same point of view is shared by Malcolm Lyons in his study on the Crusades' legacy in Arabic popular literature. Speaking about our modern knowledge of the history of the Crusades, he notes that:

> We may be better acquainted with the form of the period rather than its spirit, its statics rather than its dynamics. [..]. But if evidence from the missing level is to be found at all, then this is perhaps its only plausible source.[8]

Jonathan Phillips also emphasizes the importance of folk epics for the study of the survival of the memory of the Crusades in the Arab World:

> A number of the writers discussed below worked during the Mamluk era and it is not surprising that Baibars featured prominently therein. He was also the subject of an epic narrative, an immensely popular genre, with the Sirat al-Baibars widely presented down the centuries. A western visitor to Cairo in the 1830s observed around thirty street performers recounting Baibars' life in this way. Such stories were primarily works of entertainment, but they can be seen as transmitting preoccupations and stereotypes.[9]

Among the studies of the Arabic epics related to the Crusades, it is necessary to note the chapters devoted to the perception of Europe by Muslims: "The Land of War: Europe in the Arab Hero Cycles"[10] by Malcolm

[7] Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1999) 263, 266-267.

[8] Malcolm Lyons, "The Crusading Stratum in the Arabic Hero Cycles" in *Crusaders and Muslims in twelfth-century Syria*, 147-161, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 148.

[9] Jonathan Phillips, *The Life and Legend of the Sultan Saladin*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 332.

[10] Malcolm Lyons, "The Land of War: Europe in the Arab Hero Cycles" in *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 41-51.

Lyons and "Exploring Europe through Medieval Islamic Folk Literature"[11] by Niall Christie. These studies, however, are focused precisely on the idea of the land of the Franks (*bilād al-ifranj*) as a geographical locus and the connection of the adventures described in the Epics with real historical events.

Alex Mallett, in the introduction to his study of the perception of the Crusades by their Muslim contemporaries, when reviewing sources, notes:

> As well as historical works, there are a number of other genres of Arabic sources that are useful for this study. Religious texts, travel literature, folktales and others provide a rich mine of further information and provide evidence from areas of society that are not usually recorded in purely historical sources. However, these texts have many of the same problems of the historical works, as they were written by the same educated, religious classes and consequently are focused, once again, on either the author's own class or their superiors in society, and carry the same prejudices.[12]

This clarification about the elite component in folk literature seems to us only partly fair, since although folk epics were considerably influenced by the contemporary historiography, the historical narratives in them were reinterpreted and significantly altered by folk storytellers, acquiring new details and changing their structure under the logic of the narrative. These works were appealing to the common people, while elite groups considered the popular epics to be "stupid and unworthy of attention", in the words of Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), who severely criticized them.[13] At the same time, it is important to note that although the popular Arabic epics can be used (with due care) to study the perception of the Crusades by those who witnessed them, they also remain the most important source for studying the

[11] Niall Christie, "Exploring Europe through Medieval Islamic Folk Literature" in *The Historian of Islam at Work. Essays in Honor of Hugh N. Kennedy* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 503-520.

[12] Alex Mallett, *Popular Muslim Reactions to the Franks in the Levant, 1097–1291* (London: Routledge, 2016): 8.

[13] Roger Allen, D. S. Richards (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature, Vol. 6: Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 260.

preservation of the memory of the era of the Crusades in the Middle East, especially during the period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The main goal of this article is to study the image of the struggle for sacred spaces between the Arab/Muslim epic heroes and their Christian rivals, the Franks (*Ifranj*) and Byzantines (*Rūm*), in Arabic folk epics. This article also complements the author's previous study on the patterns of preservation of the Arab memory of the Crusades.[14]

The sources for this study are the folk epics *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād* (Life of ʿAntara ibn Shaddād),[15] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* (Life of the Banū Hilāl tribe),[16] *Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* (The Western Migration of Banī Hilāl tribe), *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim* (Story of al-Zīr Sālim), *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* (Life of Dhāt al-Himma)[17] and *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* (Life of al-Ẓāhir Baybars).[18] The choice of these works is due to their great distribution and popularity in the Levant and Egypt in the late Middle Ages and the Modern Age, which was unanimously noted by European travelers and researchers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[19] In the examples from the texts of the epics presented in this article, typos made in printed versions have been corrected and grammatical features have been preserved (some of them are specified in the footnotes).

[14] Oleg Sokolov, "The Memory of the Crusades in the Arabic Folk Epics: Images and Patterns," *Vostok (Oriens)*, no. 6 (2022), 172–181.

[15] ʿAntara b. Shaddād (presumably 525–608 AD) was the famous pre-Islamic Arabian poet and adventurer; he was the author of one of the prestigious *muʿallaqāt* poems.

[16] The Banū Hilāl tribe were a confederation of Arab tribes originally from the Hejaz and Najd regions of Arabia who migrated to North Africa in the eleventh century. The Banū Hilāl epic cycle covers the history of the tribe from their residence in Arabia to their migration to North Africa through the Levant and Egypt. The legendary ancestor of the Banū Hilāl was the pre-Islamic hero al-Zīr Sālim (real name ʿUday b. Rabīʿa), nicknamed al-Muhalhil, the main character of the epic *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim* (Story of al-Zīr Sālim).

[17] Fāṭima Dhāt al-Himma was the legendary Arab warrior of the early Abbasid period from the Banū Kilāb tribe.

[18] Al-Ẓāhir Baybars (1223–1277) was the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt, famous for his successful struggle against Mongols and Crusaders.

[19] Oleg Sokolov, "Vanquishers of the Crusaders: Mujāhidūn Characters in Arabic Folk Epics" *Religions* 14, no. 8 (2023), 1042.

Religious Motivation and Zeal of the Franks (*Ifranj*) and Byzantines (*Rūm*)

In the Arabic folk epics, we see many examples of the crusading intentions of the Franks (*Ifranj*) and Byzantines (*Rūm*), represented by their aspirations for the victory of Christianity over other religions. This is expressed primarily in the fact that the main goals of the *Ifranj* are the conversion of all infidels to the true faith and the seizure of territories, including the capture and re-sacralization of sacred spaces belonging to other religious communities. The *Rūm* in most cases act in the same way, but there are also many examples where the Arabs help the *Rūm* against overly fanatical *Ifranj*.

A clear example of the focus of Christians on the spread of their faith by force in the epic literature is found in *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād*. In this epic the Christian leader Badramūṭ arrives at the court of the Byzantine ruler (*qayṣar*) of Antioch. He learns that the ruler pays tribute to the Sasanian Persian king Khosrow (*kisrā*), the fire-worshiper, and it is only thanks to this tribute that the *qayṣar* can rule the lands of the Levant (*al-Shām*). Badramūṭ says that this is absolutely unacceptable and it is necessary to wage war against Khosrow in order to show him the "true faith":

> And his feelings rioted, and he said: "[I swear] by the righteousness of Christ and the altar and the sacrificed one, I would not have said that there is in the world somebody, who does not worship Christ, and if this king is as you mentioned, then there is nothing left for us, but [to wage] a holy war and show him the true faith).[20]

Thus, we are witnessing a call for a crusade-type expedition. At the same time, it is important to note that Khosrow is presented as a just and reasonable ruler, while Badramūṭ is a portrayed as a rude and impudent person. When Badramūṭ arrives at Khosrow's court and says that the Christians do not want to pay tribute and challenges the Persian army to battle, Khosrow reacts calmly:

[20] *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-ʿArabiyya, [n.d.]), vol. 1, 261. *Wa-inzaʿaja ḥawāssuhu wa-qāla wa-ḥaqq al-Masīḥ wa-l-madhbaḥ wa-l-dhabīḥ ma kuntu aqūlu anna fī al-dunyā man yaʿbudu ghayr al-masīḥ wa-in kāna hādhā al-malik kamā dhakarta fa-mā baqiya ghayr al-jihād wa-iẓhār al-dīn al-ṣaḥīḥ.*

> And when Khosrow heard these words from the interpreter, signs of anger appeared on his face, but he maintained his composure because he was a righteous king, and fairness returned him to prudence.[21]

Moreover, the sage ʿAmr in the court of Khosrow predicted the coming of Muḥammad and spent most of his time in Mecca. He also stated that the Persians and Arabs should stand together against other communities:

> And it was from the vizier ʿAmr b. Nafīla, who was from the category of long-livers, who were waiting for the appearance of Muḥammad, peace be upon him, because he lived for five hundred years, and most of the time he spent in the Kaʿba.[22]

Thus, in this episode the Christians invade from outside, encroaching on the inhabitants of the Levant and their religion. At the same time, the fire-worshippers (Zoroastrians) are presented here as the allies of the Arabs and their image is much more positive than the image of Christians, because the Zoroastrian king is presented as a noble ruler as opposed to a rude and fanatical Christian commander, while a wise seer anticipates the appearance of the prophet of the true faith. It can be assumed that the alliance of fire-worshippers and Arabs against an external enemy depicted here would have seemed to the medieval Arab audience as a kind of prototype of the Muslim Ummah opposing Christians attacking from outside of *dār al-islām* (The world of Islam).

In *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād* there are also examples of the direct threats of the Franks to the sacred space of the Zoroastrians. For instance, in one of the episodes, the Byzantine emperor warns his Christian allies (the Ghassanids) that "the troops from different nations set out to the lands of *al-Shām*, all of them are from groups of different races of the Frankish invaders (*ṭawāʾif mukhtalifat al-ajnās min ghuzāt al-ifranj*)".

---

[21] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 1, 262. *Fa-lammā samiʿa kisrā min al-tarjumān hādhā al-kalām bāna fī wajhihi al-ghaḍab illā annahu mā aẓhara shayʾan min hādhā al-naṣb li-annahu kāna malikan ʿādilan wa-l-ʿadl yarudduhu ilā al-ṣawāb*.

[22] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 1, 258. *Wa-kāna hādhā li-wazīr ʿamrū ibn nafīla min jumlat al-muʿammarīn al-muntaẓirīn li-ẓuhūr sayyidinā muḥammad ṣallā al-lāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallama li-annahu qad ʿāsha khamsumiʾat ʿām wa-kāna akthar maqāmihi fī al-bayt al-ḥarām*.

> And their leader is called al-Khīljān,[23] he is feared by men and jinn, and he is the one who conquered the islands of the seas, and he marched striving for the victory of the worshipers of the crosses and destruction of the houses/temples of fire.[24]

Here we are faced with an example of the religious motivation of the Franks, whose goal is to capture and destroy the sacred places and objects of another religion in order to build their own places of worship over the ruins of the former. Another important example is the attack of the Christians against the Jews. Al-Zīr Sālim (known by the epithet of al-Muhalhil), the protagonist of the epic of the same name, finds himself in Beirut, which is governed by the Jewish ruler Ḥakmūn. The city is unexpectedly attacked by the king of the *Rūm,* Jupiter the Crusader (*birgīs al-ṣalībī*) and the protagonist helps repel the attack.[25] In this case, it is also important to note that when the ruler asks the hero what his name is, al-Muhalhil, not wanting to reveal his real name, answers:

> My name is Monotheist, servant of the Great God, Lord of Moses and Abraham.[26]

In this case, it is important to note that the monotheist hero bravely confronts the Christian invaders.[27] Thus, in this case we see yet another example of pre-Islamic alliance of representatives of the local Levantine religious communities (the pre-Islamic Arab monotheists and the Jews of Beirut) against the Christians invading the region "from the outside"[28].

Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars also emphasizes the religious nature of the confrontation with the antagonists of the epic. For example, it is emphasized

[23] In *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād* there are two variants of this name: Khalijān and Khīljān.

[24] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 4, 202. *Wa-lahum muqaddam yuqālu lahu al-khīljān tafzaʿu minhu al-ins wa-l-jānn wa-huwa allaadhī fataḥa jazāʾir al-biḥār wa-kharaja yaṭlubu nuṣrat ʿubād al-ṣulbān wa-yuhaddimu buyūt al-nīrān*.

[25] *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim al-Kabīr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jumhūriyya al-Miṣriyya, [n.d.]), 79–81.

[26] *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim,* 76. *Ismī muwaḥḥid wa-ana ʿabd al-ilāh al-ʿaẓīm rabb Mūsā wa-Ibrāhīm*.

[27] Sokolov, "The Memory of the Crusades", 176.

[28] Although the epic says that the attacking Christians came from Kisrawān (Mount Lebanon), it is crucial to note that they are Rūm, that is, an external element for the Muslim Middle East.

that the Frankish king challenges the legitimate Muslim religious authorities and does not respect them, and of course, does not fear God.

> On our way [there is] a king from among the kings of the Franks, whose name is Faranjīl, but he is fierce and stubborn […] he plunders the money of the Muslims and does not pay attention to the Commander of the Faithful and does not fear the authority of the Lord of the Worlds.[29]

The epics also often talk about the desire of the Christians to seize all of the Muslim lands and convert all of the people to Christianity. For example, Leon (*Lawūn*), the ruler of Constantinople, having received a false report, thinks that his commander Luke (*Lūqā*) has defeated the Muslims. Based on this, he rejoices, saying that he will capture all Muslim lands and convert everyone to Christianity.

> And at first the news came that Luke defeated the Muslims, and Leon said: "If Luke went [for this], he will conquer all the Muslim lands and turn the people of the world to the Christian faith and the Lord Christ will reward [him] for this intention".[30]

The Franks also often express the idea that what they need is the Christian Holy Land. In particular, in *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād*, the King of the Franks, Khalijān, accuses the Byzantine emperor (Caesar) of laziness and lack of zeal in the war against the infidels, and promises to first defeat the Arabs, and then kill the emperor and rule the Holy Land on his own.

> And to keep on this until I hasten his killing and rule the land of Christ after him and impose true justice there.[31]

---

[29] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1996), vol. 1, 241. *Fī ṭarīqinā malik min mulūk al-ifranj yuqālu lahu faranjīl lakinnahu jabbār ʿanīd […] yanhabu amwāl al-muslimīn wa-lā yubālī min amīr al-muʾminīn wa-lā yakhshā saṭwat rabb al-ʿālamīn*.

[30] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-Shaʿbiyya, 1980–1981), vol. 1, 364. *Wa-kāna al-khabar waṣala min al-awwal anna lūqā huwa al-ẓāfir ʿalā al-muslimīn fa-qāla lāwūn inna lūqā law kharaja yamliku jamīʿ al-bilād al-islāmiyya wa yaruddu ahl al-arḍ ilā al-milla al-masīḥiyya wa yuqābilu al-sayyid al-masīḥ bi-tilka al-niyya*.

[31] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 4, 238. *Wa-lā azāla kadhālika ḥattā uʿajjila qatlahu wa-amlika baʿdahu bilād al-masīḥ wa-uẓhira fīhā al-ʿadl al-ṣaḥīḥ*. The hole sentence starts with *ʿawwaltu an* …, that is why "azāla" ends with "a".

ʿAntara, however, kills Khalijān, to the delight of Caesar, and the Byzantines conclude a truce with the Arabs. In this example, it is also essential to emphasize that the Franks are depicted as the most fanatical of Christians, and that they are determined against all odds to conquer the Holy Land.[32] Thus, we see that the confrontation with the *Ifranj* and *Rūm* in the epics is presented as having primarily a religious nature, and the capture of sacred spaces is essential for the Christians. Next, we will analyze episodes with threats to two holy cities: Jerusalem and Mecca.

A threat to Jerusalem

First of all, it should be noted that the epics regularly emphasize the special significance of Jerusalem for Muslims. For instance, in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the sinister character Shammās, who pretends to be a righteous Muslim, tells the Arab king Ṣaḥṣāḥ that he will go to Jerusalem to pray for the victory of the Muslims over the infidels.

> Jerusalem, it is the place of martyrs and traces of pious and joyful ones, and I will meet there with righteous men and pray for your victory over the infidels.[33]

The importance and sacredness of Jerusalem for Muslims is also emphasized in *Taghrībat Banī Hilāl*. During their journey through the Levant to North Africa, the Banū Hilāl visit the sacred spaces in Jerusalem.

> They arrived at noble Jerusalem, where they visited the holy places.[34]

It is also necessary to emphasize the importance of Jerusalem for the Christians, both *Ifranj* and *Rūm*, which comes across in various scenarios. One of the recurring patterns in this case is the story about a Frankish princess, who secretly converted to Islam. In *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the Frankish princess, who allied with the Muslim heroes, uses pilgrimage as an opportunity to run away

[32] Sokolov, "Vanquishers of the Crusaders", 1042.

[33] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 401. *Bayt al-maqdis wa-huwa maḥall al-shuhadāʾ wa-āthār al-mutaʿabbidīn wa-l-suʿadāʾ wa-ajtamiʿu hunāka bi-l-ṣāliḥīn wa-adʿū lakum bi-l-naṣr ʿalā al-kāfirīn*.

[34] *Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* (Beirut: Dār ʿUmar Abū al-Naṣr, 1971), 91. *Waṣalū ilā al-quds al-sharīf ḥaythu zārū al-amākin al-muqaddasa.*

with them, and the nobles of the realm fully support her desire to visit Jerusalem, confirming that it is obligatory for Christians.

> Know that lady Zahr al-Bān asked from me [permission for] pilgrimage to noble Jerusalem, and what do you say about this?", and they replied: "It is a duty for everyone.[35]

In this context, we see the transfer of the Islamic concept of the obligatory *ḥajj* to Mecca to Christian realities.

Yet another Frankish princess from this epic, Narjīs, also wants to go to Jerusalem and asks her father about it.

> And my desire, father, is to go to visit it [i.e. Jerusalem] and fill myself with its light.[36]And she set out to visit noble Jerusalem with sixty thousand knights.[37]

In *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, ʿUyūn, the daughter of one of the Christian kings, converts to Islam in a dream. Afterwards, she, together with the Muslim hero Ibrāhīm, who was earlier captured by the Franks, kills the king of the Franks Tardūd and his son Martīn. Then she temporarily turns Ibrāhīm into Tardūd, and herself into Martīn using the "mirror of transformation" (*mirayat al-inqilāb*). After that, in the palace, they play out a scene in order to escape without arousing the suspicion of the Franks:

> She said: "Father, I intend to visit Jerusalem", he said to him [in fact, to her as she was disguised]: "My son, I will prepare a ship for you".[38]

In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the protagonists Abū Muḥammad al-Baṭṭāl and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb are captured by the Franks, but at first they manage to

[35] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl al-kubrā shal-shāmiyya al-aṣliyya* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Andalus, [n.d.]), 127. *Iʿlamū bi-anna al-sitt zahr al-bān ṭalabat minnī al-ḥajj ilā al-quds al-sharīf fa-mādhā taqūlū bi-hādhā al-shaʾn fa-ajābūhu hādhā farḍ ʿalā kull insān*.

[36] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 593. *Fa-murādī yā abī an arūḥa zawrahā wa amtaliʾ bi-nūrihā*.

[37] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 594. *Wa innaha ṭalaʿat ilā ziyārat al-quds al-sharīf wa-maʿahā sittīn alf fāris*.

[38] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, vol. 5, 2812. *Qālat ya abī anā qaṣadī azūru al-quds qāla lahu yā waladī anā ujahhizu laka Markab*.

impersonate monks from Jerusalem and even convince a Frankish king to give them gifts for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Al-Baṭṭāl says that he will not take the treasure for himself, but may take it for "his disciples and those who he left there".

> And if not for this I would not take anything from these offerings, but we will spread them among the poor in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and those who are there, and the king thanked him for that.[39]

The epics also mention the naive ideas of Christians about the purifying and miraculous nature of the sacred spaces of Jerusalem. For example, in *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, Ḥamqān, a relative of the king of Tangier, deceives the king of Catalonia ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, convincing him to send his treasures to Jerusalem in order to ritually "purify" them. As a result, the hero steals the treasure, while ʿAbd al-Masīḥ is captured by Baybars. "Wash it in Saint Mary's Pool[40] and purify it from the dirt and filth and [then] make armor for warriors from it".[41]

In addition to this, there are stories in the epics about the Franks sacrificing Muslims in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The above-mentioned Muslim character Ibrāhīm in *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, who, thanks to the "mirror of transformation", for some time begins to look like the king of the Franks, wants to escape from them on a ship with a Muslim crew, recently captured by the Franks. He tells the Franks that those Muslims are not to be killed, as he wants to sacrifice them in Jerusalem. And he said: "Those I will slaughter them as a sacrifice in the doorway of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre".[42]

Finally, the epics contain many examples of direct Christian threats to Jerusalem and attempts to capture it. For example, Carole Hillenbrand and Malcolm Lyons cite an instance of this scenario from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*. The

---

[39] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 807-809. *Wa-law lā hādhā mā kuntu akhadhtu shayʾan min hādhihi al-nudhūr wa lakin nufarriquhum ʿalā fuqarāʾ al-qumāma wa-allādhīna yuqīmūna fīhā fa-shakarahu al-malik ʿalā dhālika". Name mockery: qumāma (garbage) instead of qiyāma (resurrection).*

[40] Saint Mary's Pool - a spring in the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem, also known as "Fountain of the Virgin" or "Gihon Spring".

[41] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, vol. 4, 2713-2714. *Ighsilhā min ʿayn sulwān wa-ṭahhirhā min al-danas wa-l-najāsa wa iṣnaʿ malābis li-l-ʿasākir minhā.*

[42] *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, vol. 5, 2812. *Wa-qāla hāʾulāʾi adhbaḥuhum qurbān ʿalā bāb al-qumāma al-qudsiyya.*

Frankish king Mīlās arrives, having been ordered in a dream to rescue Jerusalem from the hands of the Muslims and to "sit on the throne of Constantinople". Emperor Armānūs comes to meet him, and the Frank, who has not risen to greet him, says: "You are like a son to me", considering the emperor below himself in nobility and power.[43] After Mīlās, having appealed to all the Frankish countries and assembled a great army, passes through Constantinople on his way to the Levant, he is defeated and killed by the heroine of the epic, Dhāt al-Himma, "the mother of the warriors of the faith and the defender of the religion of Muhammad." Later, Dhāt al-Himma is praised for saving Jerusalem from the infidel threat.[44]

In *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād*, the Frankish King Khīljān also sets out to attack Jerusalem with a large army, marching under countless banners and crosses.

> And he set out to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Saint Mary's Pool <…> And he sent a messenger to Khosrow with the words: "Get out of these lands, and if fear of our arrival grips your heart, then [you have nothing to do but to] worship Jesus the son of Mary and become our adherent, and destroy the temples of fire, and build churches and monastic cells instead of them".[45]

A Threat to Mecca

The supreme sacredness of Mecca for Muslims is also often emphasized in the Arabic epics. For instance, in *Sīrat ʿAntara ibn Shaddād*, the Byzantine emperor turns to ʿAntara for help and reports that the ruler of the Franks set out from their lands with four hundred thousand fighters (*kharaja min bilād al-ifranj fī arbaʿi miʾat alf qātil*). When ʿAntara learns that he will fight the Franks, he

[43] Malcolm Lyons, *The Arabian Epic. Heroic and Oral Story-Telling. Volume 3: Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 474-475.

[44] Hillenbrand, *The Crusades*, 265-266.

[45] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 4, 211. *Kharaja yaṭlubu al-ḥajj ilā bayt al-maqdis wa-ʿayn sulwān […] . Wa-anfadha ilā kisrā rasūlan yaqūlu lahu irḥal min hādhihi al-bilād wa-in kāna qad dakhala fī qalbika min qudūminā fazaʿ wa-illā ʿud ilā ʿibādat al-masīḥ bin maryam wa kun ladaynā tābiʿan wa-ihdim buyūt al-nīrān wa-ibni badlahā kanaʾīs wa-shawāmiʿ.*

swears by Muslim sacred symbols from Mecca saying: "[I swear] by the Kaʿba, Zamzam and Maqām [of Ibrāhīm], I will make them a tale among people".[46]

In the epics, there are also numerous stories about a direct threat to Mecca from Christians. In *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* the king of the *Rūm* wants to conquer Mecca. The ruler of Mecca, Qirḍāb al-Sharīf b. Hāshim, composes a poem with a call upon the Banū Hilāl for help against the infidels. He said: "Came the disgusting king of Byzantines.[47] The disgusting [one] wants to fight heading for Mecca and its [neighboring] towns to destroy the land".[48]

In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, the main antagonist ʿUqbā promises King Manuel that they will capture Mecca, destroy the Kaʿba and establish the Christian faith everywhere:

> I will destroy the kingdom of the Abbasids […] and there will not be a king on the Earth beside you and no faith except your faith […] and you will march to Mecca and destroy the Kaʿba, and [then] you will march to Yathrib with a thousand patricians[49] and demolish its walls.[50]

In the same epic, there is another example of an attack on Mecca. The patrician Ibn Jurjīs went on a campaign against Muḥammad, wanting to turn the Kaʿba into a church. He set off and marched for seven days until he stopped in a meadow. Looking at his army, he saw that it filled all the horizons, and he rejoiced and became proud of himself.

---

[46] *Sīrat ʿAntara*, vol. 8, 158. *Wa-qāla ʿantar wa-ḥaqq al-bayt al-ḥarām wa-zamzam wa-l-maqām la-ajʿalannahum uḥdūtha bayna al-anām.*

[47] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 36. *Atā al-malik al-abshaʿ min al-rūm.*

[48] *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, 37. *Al-abshaʿ yaṭlubu al-qitāl qāṣid ilā makka wa-kull bilādihā li-yukharriba al-arḍ.*

[49] Patrikios (πατρίκιος) was one of the highest Byzantine titles. Etymologically, the word patrician is associated with the ancient Roman class of patricians (lat. *patricius*), but in the Byzantine context it had a completely different meaning. Unlike in Rome, where it was the highest title of the hereditary aristocracy, in Byzantium it was a title that was bestowed by the emperor and was not hereditary. In the West, this title was of greater importance, acquiring a connection with the high military rank of *magister militum*, the holders of which had the exclusive right to receive the title of patrician. From the eighth century onwards, the title of patrician was borne by the kings of the Franks.

[50] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 887. *Sawfa ukharribu mulk banī al-ʿabbās [...] wa-lā yabqā ʿalā wajh al-arḍ malik ghayruka wa-lā dīn siwā dīnika […] wa tasīru ilā makka wa tuhaddimu al-bayt al-ʿatīq wa-tasīru ilā yathrib bi-alf baṭrīq wa-tukharribu judrānahā.*

> And he said: "I want to make the Kaʿba of the scorpion[51] a church for the Byzantines despite the disagreement of our disparaged sage", then he fell asleep being drunk from wine, and he saw in his dream that a door opened in the sky and a person descended from there.[52]

It was the Angel who said: "Oh, Ibn Jurjīs, Iblīs played with your mind. The one you came for is the Messenger of Allah, about whom ʿĪsāʾ warned". And the angel hit Ibn Jurjīs with his hand, and the head of the patrician "fell between the shoulders".[53] In this case, the threat of the transformation of the Muslim sacred space into a Christian one is important. It is possibly an allusion to the re-sacralization of al-Aqṣā and the Dome of the Rock by the Crusaders, as well as the conversion of other mosques on the territories of the Crusader states into churches.

Conclusions

Although the threat to the sacred spaces in the epics often comes not from the Franks, but from the Byzantines, and the action itself takes place in pre-Islamic times, the whole complex of narratives about the threats to sacred spaces in these works can be considered a repercussion of the Crusades, since the Arabic folk epics mentioned above developed precisely during this period and as a response to these events. The inclusion of plots about the struggle for the key sacred spaces of Islam in the tribal narrative and the stories about the struggle against the infidels on the Byzantine-Abbasid frontier, which were the basis of folk epics, indicate the great importance of the idea of protecting Jerusalem and Mecca in the Medieval Arabic folk culture. At the same time, it is important to note that in the epics there are no episodes of battles for Jerusalem and Mecca because the Christians are always defeated before they can reach them.[54]

---

[51] The origin of this epithet is unknown.

[52] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 290. Wa qāla urīdu ajʿal kaʿbat al-ʿaqrab bīʿa li-l-rūm raghman ʿan anaf ḥakīminā al-madhmūm thumma nāma wa huwa sakrān min al-khamr fa-raʾā fī manāmihi anna al-samāʾ qad futiḥa lahā bāb wa-nazala lahu shakhṣ.

[53] *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, vol. 1, 290.

[54] Though in some episodes of *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars* Jerusalem is described as being held by the Franks.

It is crucial to observe that in the epics we find plots where the positively depicted Zoroastrians and Jews oppose the negatively described Christians, thus the former, in a sense, replace the Muslims in the defense of the sacred spaces of the Middle East from the invading *Ifranj* and *Rūm*, the ongoing war with whom is eternal in the epics. Moreover, Christians, especially the Franks, are dehumanized in the epics and pagan traits and rites are attributed to them, by introducing episodes like human sacrifices in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

It is also important to note that the Frankish and Byzantine characters have dreams in which Jesus or angels say that they must conquer Muslim sacred spaces, but then it turns out that it was actually Iblīs (Satan) or genies who spoke. Another remarkable point is that when it is said that a Christian ruler "wants to make a pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) to Jerusalem", he always has a large army with him, and often declares that he wants to capture this sacred space.

The epics also portray the focus of the Christians on Jerusalem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In addition, we can assume that these works helped to create the image of the Frankish threat to Mecca in the popular imagination. It is important to note that before the Crusades, there were practically no precedents for the capture of Muslim sacred space by Christians, and that during the Crusades, Jerusalem with its shrines was captured, and there was also a significant threat to Mecca and Medina. Furthermore, despite the fact that Jerusalem is portrayed as a more important goal for Christians and, historically, it was indeed the object of the most active struggle between religious communities, Mecca is also given huge attention in the epic literature, because it is very important for Muslims themselves. In this case, it is also essential to note that since the Arabic epics emerged mainly in the Levant, the struggle for Jerusalem was of particular importance for the local folk storytellers there. Thus the Crusades, thanks to the popularity of folk epics in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, kept alive in the collective memory of the Arabs of Egypt and the Levant the idea of a European threat to Muslim sacred space.

Based on this, it can be assumed that some of the infamous incidents concerning Middle Eastern sacred spaces during the First World War reproduce the memory of the Frankish threat to the Muslim sacred space beginning with the time of the Crusades. This includes the episodes with two European military commanders: the English general Edmund Allenby (1861–1936) and the French general Henri Gouraud (1867–1946).

When the British troops entered Jerusalem in December 1917, General Allenby, in the presence of the noble Arab families of the city, is purported to

have uttered the phrase: "Only now have the Crusades ended".[55] Likewise, during the entry of French troops into Damascus, General Gouraud, while near the grave of Salah al-Din, spoke his famous words: "Awake, Saladin, we are back. My presence here heralds the victory of the cross over the crescent" (*fr*. Réveille-toi, Saladin, nous sommes de retour. Ma présence ici consacre la victoire de la croix sur le croissant).[56]

It should be noted that although the facts of such speeches delivered by the above-mentioned European commanders are in doubt, these events have nonetheless acquired great symbolic significance and are firmly rooted in the modern Arab cultural memory.[57] The descriptions of these cases are united by one important detail: they carry the ontological idea of violating the sacred space, whether it be trampling the graves of famous Muslim military leaders or claiming the right to the territory of the holy city of Jerusalem. Such episodes can, presumably, be considered examples of the reproduction of the memory of the desecration of the Muslim sacred spaces in the Holy Land by the Crusaders. Therefore, the preservation of the memory of the Crusades in the folk epics may be the reason why these episodes have become so crowd-pleasing. The very pattern of the incidents ascribed to Allenby and Gouraud was on "the horizon of expectations" of the Arab population of the Levant, since these two generals seemed to have carried out actions that coincide with

[55] Mark Urban questions the reality of such a statement by Allenby, noting that remembering the Pan-Islamic propaganda of the Ottomans, who declared jihād against the Allies in 1914, Allenby himself did not recommend his subordinates to use the "image of the Crusaders" and forbade his officers to use the terms "Crusade" and "Crusaders" in press statements. At the same time, the general emphasized that he was fighting only against the Ottoman Empire, and not against Islam. See, Mark Urban, *Generals: Ten British Commanders who Shaped the World*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 233.

[56] Karl Meyer, Shareen Brysac, *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 359.

[57] It is important to note the archetypal nature of such a plot, since a similar episode at the same time took place in the history of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922). The future Prime Minister of Greece Sofoklis Venizelos (1894-1964) after the occupation of Bursa by the Greek troops in August 1920 kicked the grave of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Osman Ghazi (1258-1324) with the words: "Get up, Osman! Get up and save your country!". Venizelos also took a picture at the grave. See, Dimitris Keridis, *Historical Dictionary of Modern Greece* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 165.

the intentions of the *Ifranj* and the *Rūm* against the sacred spaces as depicted in the Arabic folk epics.