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Between Myth, Memory and History: Persian Texts and the Making of the 'Tomb of Jesus' in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

The site of Rozabal in Srinagar, Kashmir, locally called the burial place of a *nabī'* (prophet), is famously known as the Tomb of Jesus. This paper analyses portrayals of the site in two well-known Persian texts from Kashmir, Azam Dedmari's mid eighteenth century *Wāqiʿāt-i Kashmir* (*Events of Kashmir*) and Hassan Khuihami's late nineteenth century *Asrār-ul Akhyār* (*Secrets of the Pious*). We seek to demonstrate how the bringing together of the oral and textual narratives into a genre of historical chronicles by the two authors played a critical role in mapping the site of Rozabal onto the larger canvas of what Nile Green has termed as a 'sacred geography' of the region. We argue that the making of Rozabal as an Islamic shrine presents a perfect case of the Persian texts creating sacred geographies at the intersection of myth, memory and history. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims about Jesus's burial in the shrine and the subsequent undying debates between his proponents and opponents revolved around reinterpretations of *Wāqiʿāt* and *Asrār*'s textual descriptions of the site, demonstrating the renewed lives of these texts in modern contexts.

Introduction

'*Tarikh-e Kashmir Uzama*, a two-century-old work, mentions that according to popular belief, a Prophet is buried next to Syed Naseer Hussain', wrote the Ahmadiyya *risala* (magazine) *Raz-e Haqiqat* in 1898, referring to Khawaja Mohammad Azam Dedmari's (d. 1765) mid eighteenth century Persian chronicle, *Wāqiʿāt-i Kashmir*'s (*Events of Kashmir*) description of the shrine of Rozabal in Srinagar.[1] Compiled in the backdrop of a *mubahala* (imprecation) between Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) and his Ahl-e Hadith opponent Muhammad Hussain Batalawi (d. 1920), the magazine repeated Ahmad's claim to the status of '*masih-mau'd*' ('the promised Messiah'). At the centre of this claim lay the site of Rozabal, which, according to Ahmad, housed the burial place of Jesus. Surprising as these assertions about associating

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1. *Ruhani Khazain: The Writing of Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani*, *Vol. 14* (Islam International Publications, 2021): 172.

scriptural prophets with Kashmir may sound, these were not a modern novelty and had precedents in the regional Persian hagiographical literature. For instance, Dedmari's junior contemporary, Saadullah Shahabadi (fl. 1780s), had similarly written about the arrival of another scriptural prophet, Sulaiman (Solomon), and labelled Kashmir as *Bāgh-i Sulaimān* (*Garden of Solomon*) in his 1780s Persian *tarikh*. Written in the late nineteenth century, Peer Hassan Shah Khuihami's (d. 1898) *Asrār-ul Akhyār* (*Secrets of the Pious*) repeated Dedmari's description of the site, even as it added new details to his account. Much like Shahabadi's account, Dedmari's and Khuihami's descriptions of the Rozabal shrine lay unnoticed for most of the time, only to seize centre stage in the wake of intense debates in the aftermath of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims to messiah-hood in the early twentieth century.[2]

This paper does not delve into the highly-contested modern debates about the shrine and the person buried inside, nor does it aim to provide a comprehensive history of the site. Instead, we analyse two texts, Dedmari's *Wāqi'āt* and Khuihami's *Asrār* to demonstrate their central role in projecting Rozabal as a sacred site within the larger sacred geography of Kashmir. We argue that this was made possible by the texts' narrative act of interweaving the oral and textual narratives within their accounts. While these textual acts have been so often understood as dominantly associated with the earliest phases of the spread of Islam in Kashmir, that is, until the sixteenth century, we seek to demonstrate how these narrative acts continued to feature in the Persian texts throughout the early modern and modern periods. In the next section, we discuss how these textual descriptions of Rozabal by Dedmari and Khuihami assumed centre stage in a new context of colonial knowledge formation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We conclude by pointing out how incorporating oral accounts into historical chronicles became central to and even shaped sectarian contestations over a shrine in a modern religio-political context.

Sanskrit and Persian texts composed in premodern and early modern Kashmir are used, often uncritically, as sources of historical 'facts', even as their role in the composition and narration of 'history' is left unexplored. In his 2014 book, *Making Space*, Nile Green argues that hagiographical texts, specifically their narrative of saints' migrations, played a critical role in creating new Islamic sacred spaces in South Asia.[3] In describing an example that perfectly fits the case of Kashmir, Green notes that textual narratives played an important part in Islamising the spaces of new homelands by associating them with bodies of saints and scriptural prophets.[4] Green's larger argument, which connects these textual narratives to Sufi migrations and their claims over new homelands, applies to many Persian hagiographies of immigrant Sufi saints compiled in early modern Kashmir. However, this framework does not adequately address the narrative construction of sacred spaces in encyclopaedic works such as *Wāqi'āt* and *Asrār*, which focussed on recording the lives of

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2. See Yohanan Friedman, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

3. Nile Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Nile Green, 'Migrant Sufis and Sacred Space in South Asian Islam', *Contemporary South Asia* 12, no. 4 (2011): 493–509.

4. Green, *Making Space*, 122.

Sufi saints in the region. We turn to Chitralekha Zutshi's framework articulated in her 2014 book, *Contested Pasts*, for analysing the textual creation of sacred spaces. While Zutshi follows Green in emphasising the role of Sufi hagiographies in defining Kashmir as an Islamic sacred space, her work locates this textual act in the specific religio-political context of eighteenth and twentieth century Kashmir.[5] According to her, 'regional myths' from the local Sanskrit narratives and sacred sites were 'relocated' by the Persian texts 'into a universal Islamic imagination', an intervention that also explains why these texts blended 'myths' and 'facts'.[6] Zutshi argues that this 'interfertilization of folk, oral and written texts' can be attributed partly to their use of a broader 'literary repertoire' comprising of Sanskrit, Kashmiri and other Persian traditions.[7] As such, while establishing connections with the larger Islamicate world was an important part of the texts, at the same time, these textual constructions of sacred spaces were political assertions of regional uniqueness and its sacred past, and had less to do with migration and the establishment of new homelands. This focus on constructing a politically unique and sacred regional past explains why these texts integrated pre-Islamic regional legends and myths into their accounts.

As such, concomitant practices of the spread of Islam, such as the composition of Persian *ta'rīkh* and *tazkira* works, did not end even after the majority of the local population had supposedly embraced Islam; instead, they continued to flourish beyond the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries well into modern times.[8] Thus, textual relocations and adaptations usually associated with the earliest of the extant Persian works were, in fact, a regular feature of the later eighteenth and nineteenth century Persian texts as well. Recent studies such as Guyot-Rechard and Leake's 2023 edited volume *South Asia Unbound* have analysed the implications of the composition of regional narratives on the historical imagination of modern states and transnational entities and pointed out that their compositions indicate regional writers envisaging alternative modes of imagining and formulating new categories of regional identity.[9] In many ways, this applies to both Dedmari and Khuihami's chronicles, which, by linking their textual narratives of Kashmir to the larger Islamicate world, went beyond the physical limits of both the would-be nation-states and region of South Asia.

As the section on modern contestations on the site demonstrates, the emergence of Rozabal as the centre of religious contestations in twentieth century Kashmir had much to do with the emerging politics of knowledge formation in colonial Punjab, in which the Ahmadiyya movement initially emerged as an Indian Muslim response

5. Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 130–83.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.; for the *tazkira* mode of historiography, also see Marcia K. Hermansen and Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Indo-Persian Tazkiras as Memorative Communications', in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (University Press of Florida, 2000): 149–75.

8. Ibid.; for Islam as widespread Islam in sixteenth century Kashmir, see Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir: Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century* (Oriental Publishing House, 2004).

9. Berenice Guyot-Rechard and Elisabeth Leake, *South Asia Unbound: New International Histories of the Subcontinent* (Leiden University Press, 2023); for a summary of recent debates, see Amanda Lanzillo, 'How Should We Define a Southasian 20th Century?', *Himal Southasian*, March 26, 2024, accessed December 3, 2024, https://www.himalmag.com/politics/southasia-20th-century-history-scholarship-partition-regional-local-diaspora-politics.

to missionary activities, loss of power and crisis of faith.[10] It was in this context that the ensuing debates on the Islamic perspective on Jesus and Ahmad's subsequent claims marked a new phase in the reinterpretation of textual details on Rozabal.

Located in the Khanyar locality of Srinagar, the Rozabal shrine is commonly known as the burial place of a sixteenth century saint Syed Nasiruddin Khanyari. However, in many accounts, Rozabal is also known as the burial place of Yuz Asaf, an unknown saint whose details are unclear. The supposed east-west orientation of the grave, in contrast to the traditional Muslim burial pattern of a north-south direction, has given rise to speculations about the pre-Islamic origins of the grave.[11] The shrine's design and structure are however similar to other Sufi shrines in the region. It is a single-storey concrete 40 feet × 31 feet structure on a foundation of the locally famous *devur* stone, with five large decorated wooden windows on the *qibla* side, four windows on the north, and a single large window on the eastern side.[12] Inside this structure lies a 19 feet × 7 feet *rauẓa* enclosed by woodwork, with a glass opening on all four sides. Towards the east, a plain wooden door opens into the *rauẓa*, which houses the embroidered cloth-draped graves of two saints, Sayyid Nasir and Yuz Asaf.[13] The prominence of the shrine in the long and multi-layered tradition of regional history writing reveals its significance. This is especially so since the tradition of history writing in Kashmir, as Chitralekha Zutshi illustrates, manifested itself in multiple ways and often included a retelling of multilingual stories, memories and oral traditions along with the statement of historical facts. This narrative technique paved the way for the redefinition of Kashmir as a sacred landscape and polity.[14]

Among the extant texts, the earliest mention of Yuz Asaf comes from Dedmari's *Wāqi'āt*, which refers to an earlier anonymous work as its main source. Later works such as Saadullah Shahabadi's *Bāgh-i Sulaimān* (*Garden of Solomon*, 1780), Ghulam Muhammad Khanyari's *Wajīz-ul Tawārikh* (*A Brief History*, 1857) and Muhyuddin Miskin's *Ta'rīkh-i Kabīr* (*The Great History*, 1902) largely follow Dedmari's account of the shrine and the personalities buried in it. In contrast, Khuihami's *Asrār*, with his reference to a non-extant fifteenth century Persian chronicle, Mulla Ahmad's *Waqā'i'-i Kashmir* (*History of the Events of Kashmir*), contains a rather unique source of information. Details about Rozabal in non-extant fifteenth century texts such as Mulla Nadiri's *Ta'rīkh-i Kashmir* and Mulla Ahmad's *Waqā'i'-i Kashmir* have also been a matter of debate. In support of his claim about Jesus' burial in Kashmir, Khawaja Nazir Ahmad's 1952 work, *Jesus in Heaven on Earth*, claimed the use of Mulla Nadiri's work, which the author claimed to have discovered in Srinagar.[15] However, the unavailability of these sources for scholarly scrutiny has fed apprehensions about their

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10. Ron Geaves, 'Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the Ahmadiyya Movement', in *Islam and Britain: Muslim Mission in an Age of Empire* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018): 31–42.

11. Arif Khan, 'Rozabal: The Tomb of Jesus Christ (As)?', *The Review of Religions*, December 19, 2010, accessed December 3, 2024, https://www.reviewofreligions.org/2727/rozabal-–-the-tomb-of-jesus-christas/.

12. Muhammad Yusuf Taing, *Kashir Encyclopedia*, *Vol. 2* (Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, 1989): 9.

13. Ibid., 80.

14. Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts*, 7–9.

15. Khwaja Nazir Ahmad, *Jesus in Heaven on Earth* (Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1952): 401–3. This claim was later supported by another Kashmiri author, Fida Muhammad Hassnain: see Fida Mohammad Hassnain, *Jesus in Kashmir* (Dasthir Publication Trust, 2012): 261. Hassnain also provides the text of four

authenticity and speculations of potential forgeries, further cementing the centrality of Dedmari and Khuihami's works on the issue.

In the early twentieth century, Dedmari's reference to Rozabal as housing the burial site of a 'prophet' was central to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's claims to messiah-hood. Contrary to the mainstream Muslim belief, Ahmad argued that Rozabal contained the burial place of Jesus, a claim contested by others.[16] As Lavan argues, Ahmad's claims about the discovery of Jesus' grave in Rozabal was 'the final and perhaps the most important proof repudiating the traditional Muslim position on Jesus in favour of Ahmad as the new Promised Messiah'.[17] In turn, Ahmad's claims relied directly on a re-reading of the description of the site in the Persian texts of Kashmir, most notably *Wāqiʿāt* and *Asrār*.

Wāqiʿāt-i Kashmir and *Asrār-ul Akhyār*: Mapping Rozabal into the sacred geography of Kashmir

Dedmari and Khuihami's narrative acts were central in mapping Rozabal on the sacred geography of Kashmir. Among the extant Persian texts from Kashmir, Dedmari's *Wāqiʿāt* assumes significance because it contains the earliest known textual account of the site and the personalities buried at Rozabal.[18] *Wāqiʿāt*'s account was followed and critically engaged with by Khuihami, who also introduced an account from a now non-extant text, Mulla Ahmad's fifteenth century *Waqāʾiʿ-i Kashmir*. This was the reason why both *Wāqiʿāt* and *Asrār* assumed central importance in the modern debates on the shrine. In turn, both these texts were influenced by the emerging politico-religious context and attempted to posit Kashmir as a unique region within the larger imperial polities. This section discusses the portrayal of the site in Dedmari's *Wāqiʿāt* and Khuihami's *Asrār*, both of which were compiled as encyclopaedic works on Sufi saints in Kashmir and, as such, included oral and textual narrations about some of the lesser-known personalities in their accounts, including those buried at Rozabal.

Dedmari's work, primarily focused on recording the lives of local Muslim saints from the early fourteenth century, was compiled towards the end of Mughal rule in Kashmir between 1734 and 1744.[19] Given its detailed nature, *Wāqiʿāt* has often been used as an essential reference guide to the history of Sufism in Kashmir, and has elicited comparisons with the famous fourteenth century Persian work *Jāmiʿ al- Tawārīkh* (*Compendium of Chronicles*) of Rashid al-Din (d. 1318).[20] At the same time, critics have pointed to the use of 'hyperbole' and the inclusion of certain

'lost' inscriptions on the Shankaracharya temple: for his text of the inscriptions, see Hassnain, *Jesus in Kashmir*, 262–63.

16. Aejaz Ahmad Rather, 'Sacred Spaces as Markers of Disputes: Ahmadiyya Claims on Rozabal Shrine and Political Intervention in Kashmir', *Social Scientist* 49, no. 3/4 (2021): 574–75.

17. Spencer Lavan, *The Ahmadiyah Movement: A History and Perspective* (Manohar Book Services, 1974): 49–50.

18. This is, of course, besides an earlier account in Mulla Ahmad's fifteenth century chronicle. The text is non-extant, even as Khuihami's *Asrār* refers to its account of Rozabal.

19. Muhammad Azam Dedmari, *Wāqiʿāt-i Kashmir*, trans. Shamsuddin Ahmad (Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Research Centre, 2000): 4–5.

20. This comparison is made by Shamsuddin Ahmad, the translator of *Wāqiʿāt*: see Dedmari, *Wāqiʿāt*, 6.

'ambiguous' historical statements in the text.[21] However, as this paper argues, this was an essential defining feature of the Persian textual tradition, not just *Wāqiʿāt* alone. Dedmari's work marked the continuation of an older trend in the Persian textual tradition of bringing together the oral—often labelled as 'ambiguous' and 'hyperbolic'—along with the textual into a single narrative. Among the extant Persian texts, Dedmari's *Wāqiʿāt* provides the first such instance in which oral and textual narrations about the site of Rozabal are woven together as follows: 'In the vicinity lies a stone grave known as the burial place of a prophet who had visited Kashmir in ancient times. This place is known as the place of a prophet'.[22]

As indicated by Dedmari's use of the term '*dar ʿawāmm mashhūr ast*' (lit. it is famous among the people) regarding his description of the shrine as housing the burial of a 'prophet', his account of the Rozabal shrine is primarily based on oral stories and narrates popular beliefs about the shrine.[23] Similarly, he uses the term '*maʿrūf ast*' (lit. it is well known) while describing the place as the '*maqām-i paigham-bar*' (lit. a prophet's place).[24]

However, Dedmari's account of Rozabal goes beyond oral accounts and compiles anonymous textual references that similarly describe the site as the burial place of a prophet:

> One of the books of history contains an account which, after a far-off tale, narrates a fable that a prince after embracing a life of piety and engaging in devotion and worship was sent to Kashmir as a prophet, where he engaged in preaching.[25]

Dedmari does not identify his textual source either with reference to its author or the exact date and its language of composition. However, given the fact that Persian-language works are usually cited with reference to either the author or the title of the work in premodern and early modern Persian texts from Kashmir, we are inclined to treat this as a reference to some non-Persian, possibly Sanskrit-language text. However, Dedmari's criticism of his source is apparent since, even as he identifies it as a *kitābī az tawārikh* (lit. a book from histories), he refers to the story as '*qiṣṣa-i dūr wa darāz*' (lit. far-off tale) and its account of Rozabal as a *ḥikāyat* (lit. a fable).[26] Dedmari's implicit textual criticism is interesting, as his text *Wāqiʿāt* has been criticised by modern critics on the same grounds.

Dedmari buttresses the textual account by adding contemporary oral sources and quotes his *murshid* (lit. spiritual guide): 'Most of the persons of merit, especially the author's spiritual master Inaytullah Shaal used to say that during their visits, the blessing of prophethood used to appear from this place'.[27]

Dedmari also refers to another contemporary oral tradition on Rozabal and attributes it to an anonymous majority (*akṣar*) of *aṣḥāb-i kamāl* (lit. persons of merit), even as he subsequently adds a name, Inaytullah Shaal, described in the text

21. Abdul Rahman Kondoo 'Ta'aruf', in Dedmari, *Wāqiʿāt*, trans. Ahmad, xlv–xlvi.
22. Muhammad Azam Dedmari, *Tarikh-i Kashmir Azami* (Ghulam Muhammad Nur Muhammad Tajiran-i Kutb, n.d.): 82.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.

as his spiritual master (*murshid*).[28] Crucially, towards the end of his section on Rozabal, and immediately following his account of contemporary oral narrations about the site, Dedmari inserts the Quranic phrase '*ilmu 'inda'l-lāh*' (lit. knowledge is with Allah), reflecting a critical attitude towards the narrations recorded in his text.[29] Thus, despite being aware of the contingent nature of his statements, Dedmari seamlessly includes them within the narrative of his text. It has been argued here that far from being a drawback of his work, it was this narrative act of weaving together a diverse range of narrations—from the past as well as the present, from the oral as well as textual—that enabled Dedmari to map the site Rozabal onto the larger sacred geography of the region.

Dedmari's work subsequently became a standard reference point as several successive chroniclers copied his account of Rozabal. Among others, Dedmari's account was repeated in Saadullah Shahabadi's *Bāgh-i Sulaimān* (*Garden of Solomon*, 1780), Ghulam Muhammad Khanyari's *Wajīz-ul Tawārikh* (*A Brief History*, 1857) and Muhyuddin Miskin's *Ta'rīkh-i Kabīr* (*The Great History*, 1902). However, the most crucial intervention on Rozabal came from Khuihami's *Asrār*, the third part of his famous multivolume encyclopaedic Persian history of Kashmir, *Ta'rīkh-i Hassan*.

Even as Khuihami starts with Dedmari's account of the site and the persons buried there, he subsequently contradicts it by referring to an earlier work, the now non-extant fifteenth century Persian chronicle *Waqā'i'-i Kashmir* of Mulla Ahmad.[30] Quoting Ahmad, Khuihami describes Yuz Asaf, the person identified earlier by Dedmari as an ancient 'prophet', as the Egyptian emissary to the court of the fifteenth century Kashmiri ruler, Sultan Zayn al-Abidin (r. 1420–70).[31] Khuihami then compliments Ahmad's account on Yuz Asaf with a story about the same person narrated to him by his father, Abdul Rasul Shevah:

> This author's father Abdul Rashid Shevah says that during his student days, he had been to Sulaiman Hill with his teacher Mulla Abdullah. On the stone temple was written in a calligraphic style that an adult named Yuz Asaf from Egypt claims Prophethood, [with the inscription dated] year fifty-four Kashmir.[32]

Khuihami traces the inscription to the fifteenth century, more precisely to Sultan Zayn's renovation of the temple on the hillock known as the Shankaracharya temple. Khuihami follows up with an oral narration about this inscription to 'authenticate' Mulla Ahmad's version of the story of Yuz Asaf.[33] Put together, Khuihami uses these textual and oral narratives to contradict Dedmari's account and establish that the person buried at Rozabal, Yuz Asaf, was an Egyptian emissary to the court of a

28. Dedmari, *Wāqi'āt*, 82.
29. For the Quranic phrase, see Muhammad Taqi-ud Din Hilali and Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *Translation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language* (King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, n.d.), 67:26.
30. Some have argued that Ahmad was Sultan Zayn's court historian and that his work was a translation of an earlier Sanskrit work: see Pandit Anand Koul, 'History of Kashmir', *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 9, no. 5 (1918): 195–219; Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts*, 130–83.
31. Pir Hassan Shah Khuihami, *Tarikh-i Hassan: Tazkira-e Auliya-i Kashmir Asrār-ul Akhyār* (Director of Libraries, Research and Publications, Jammu and Kashmir, 1997): 49–50.
32. Khuihami, *Asrār*, 45.
33. Ibid., 50.

fifteenth century Kashmiri ruler.[34] At the same time, Khuihami also notes the Shia claim on Yuz Asaf and refers to their belief that he was a descendant of Ja'far as-Sadiq (d. 765), the great-grandson of the fourth Caliph Ali bin Talib (d. 661).[35] Towards the end of this account, Khuihami narrates another oral tradition about the site and notes that according to 'pure people' (*ahli ṣafā*), this place emitted the 'radiance of prophethood' (*anwāri-i nubūwat*). Interestingly though, much like Dedmari, Khuihami qualifies this statement by inserting the Qur'anic phrase *wa 'llāhū a'lam* (lit. and Allah is the best of knowers).[36] Although Khuihami's account contains an elaborate contestation of Dedmari's narration of the site, his description of Rozabal matches that of Dedmari, especially towards the end.

Both Dedmari and Khuihami self-consciously merged myth and legend and textual narration in their historical chronicle. We argue that it is precisely this apparently self-contradictory approach that enabled them to map Rozabal on the larger canvas of the sacred geography of Kashmir. It is important to remember that this narrative act was not specific to Rozabal and that it was the overarching narrative scheme of the chroniclers that shaped and framed the shrine of Rozabal in a new mould. This narrative scheme, as Zutshi indicates, reflected the chroniclers' response to reframing the region and its identity in response to new political developments.

Claiming the site: Rozabal and the modern sectarian contestations

Wāqi'āt, and later *Asrar* in modern times, assumed significant historiographical status because of their encyclopaedic nature, and, as such, their accounts on the Rozabal shrine were incorporated into the larger historiographical tradition of Kashmir. The famous Persian text, *Bāgẖ-i Sulaimān*, written by Shahabadi in 1780, incorporates Dedmari's account of the shrine into his text in a poetic framework:

> Here is the tomb, so famous! Sepulchre of the Prophet, so illuminating! Whosoever bows before it, Receives inner light, solace, and contentment. According to tradition, a prince, most accomplished, pious and great, received the kingdom of God. He was faithful to the lord who commanded him to be the Prophet. Through his grace, he became the guide for the people of this valley. Here is the burial site of that Prophet (*rauẓa*), known as Yuz Asaf.[37]

The 1898 Ahmadiyya *risala*, *Rāz-i Ḥaqīqat* (*The Truth*) published a letter attributed to Molvi Abdullah Kashmiri, which, along with references to *Wāqi'āt's* account, noted that Rozabal was known in local parlance as 'Qabr-i 'Isá ṣāḥib'. The letter was published as a *mahẓar-nāma* that enlisted the signatures of prominent contemporary Kashmiri religious scholars, including Molvi Sharifuddin, Mirwaiz Rasul Shah and Khwaja Hasan Shah Naqshbandi. Apparently, the scholars had supported Molvi Abdullah Kashmiri's testimony, which noted their alleged approval of his belief about Jesus' burial in Kashmir. The letter also incorporated Dedmari's account of Rozabal and sought to equate the term Yuz Asaf with Yasuh-Masih, a Hebrew-Arabic term

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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 51.
37. Shahabadi, *Bāgẖ-i Sulaimān*, quoted in Fida Hassnain and Dahan Levi, *The Fifth Gospel* (Dastgir Publications, 1988): 221–22.

for Jesus.[38] As explained in the introduction, Ahmad's claims about the burial of Jesus at Rozabal were central to his claims to the status of the Messiah. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, description of the site in Persian texts of Kashmir took centre stage in religious debates in colonial Punjab, which involved the Christian missionaries, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and his followers, and his Muslim critics. It was during the course of these debates towards the end of the nineteenth century that Ahmad 'reinvented' the tradition of Rozabal as a burial site of Jesus.[39] This 'reinvention', as we argue, should also be located within the new socio-political and intellectual context in which orientalist scholarship engaged with South Asian texts by treating them as repositories of facts.[40] Armed with the technology of print, Ahmad similarly sought to extract historical facts from Persian texts of Kashmir to be employed in his debates against Christian missionaries, and subsequently in support of his claims to the status of the 'promised messiah'.[41] Among other works, his 1891 *Izala-i Auham* (*The Removal of Misconceptions*) and 1898 *risala*, *Rāz-i Ḥaqīqat*, contained his claims about the Rozabal shrine as the burial place of Jesus.[42] Ahmad's 1908 work *Messiah Hindustan Mein* (*Jesus in India*) gave complete exposition to his ideology and explained his assertions about the settling down and death of Jesus in Srinagar and his subsequent burial at Rozabal.[43]

Ahmad's assertions about Jesus and his claims to the status of messiah were furiously contested in Punjab, leading to the compilation, printing and distribution of a new series of works.[44] Ahmad's views were supported by several Western scholars such as Andreas Faber Kaiser, a scholar of comparative religion, who provided much credence to the Ahmadiyya viewpoint on the post-crucifixion life of Jesus.[45] Other scholars writing on the theme, such as Holger Kersten, Fida Mohammad Hasnain, Aziz Kashmiri and Mark Mason, also propounded his theory and followed the Ahmadiyya viewpoint on the Rozabal shrine.[46] However, others such as Per Beskow critiqued the Ahmadiyya claim on the shrine by describing source texts as lacking in 'authenticity and sufficiency'.[47] Similarly, Paul Pappas, in his work, *Jesus Tomb in*

38. Molvi Muhammad Shah, *Ḥālāt-i Yuz Asaf* (National Printing Press, undated): 7. In the 1940s, Abdullah Kashmiri subsequently distanced himself from his position and alleged tampering with his letter in his two short works titled *Me'yar-e Risalat* and *Sh'ulat-al Nar*. For his *Sh'ulat-al Nar*, see Abdul Rahman Kundu, *Īsá ki Qabar Kashmir mīn Nahī* (Islamic Research Centers and Publishers Srinagar, Kashmir, 1991): 264–80.

39. For a recent analysis, see Adeel Hussain, *Revenge, Politics and Blasphemy in Pakistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022): 13–34; also see Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Jesus in India: Jesus' Deliverance from the Cross & Journey to India* (Islam International Publications, 2003): 14–102.

40. Zutshi notes this in the case of Sanskrit texts from Kashmir: see Chitralekha Zutshi, 'Past as Tradition, Past as History: The Rajatarangini Narratives in Kashmir's Persian Historical Tradition', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50, no. 2 (2013): 201–19.

41. Aejaz Ahmad Rather, 'Ahmadiyyas: The Making of an Identity in Colonial Punjab' (unpublished PhD thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2021): 29–47; for the role of print in religious contestations in India, see Francis Robinson, 'Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print', *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 229–51.

42. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Izala-i Auham* (Riyad-i Hind Press, 1891); Ahmad, *Raz-i Haqiqat*, 2.

43. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Messiah Hindustan Mein* (Islam International Publications, 1944).

44. Rather, 'Sacred Spaces', 57.

45. Andrew Faber Kaiser, *Jesus Died in Kashmir* (Gordon & Cremonesi, 1977): 103.

46. These include Holger Kersten, *Jesus Lived in India: His Unknown Life before and after the Crucifixion* (Penguin, 2001); Aziz Kashmiri, *Christ in Kashmir* (Roshni Publications, 1988); Mark Mason, *In Search of the Loving God: Resolving the Past Traumas of Christianity, and Bringing to Light Its Healing Spirit* (Dwapara Press, 1997).

47. Per Beskow, *Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels* (Fortress Press, 1983): 63.

India: A Debate on His Death and Resurrection, also contested the Ahmadiyya view-point by arguing that the Ahmadiyya claim was based on 'oral legends' and lacked any archaeological or anthropological evidence.[48] Joseph Macchio also negated the Ahmadiyya perspective on Rozabal and argued that the shrine embodied the collective faiths of 'Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christian tourists', whose visits to the tomb demonstrated that Christ was 'revered in the East as a universal prophet and teacher'.[49]

Among Kashmiri Muslims, Ahmad's claims were countered by Molvi Muhammad Shah in a short work titled *Ḥālāt-i Yuz Asaf*, which, in addition to a passage from Hasan's *Asrār*, again quoted Dedmari's account on the site. [50] Muhammad Shah cited Khuihami's *Asrār* in defence of his claim that the person buried in the shrine, Yuz Asaf, was actually an Egyptian missionary to the court of Sultan Zayn:

> Keeping in view *Asrār*'s account, these observations are not made-up but rather based on facts and presented as such to our friends that Sultan Zayn sent Sayed Abdullah Bayhaqi to Egypt and the arrival of Yuz Asaf as an emissary from Egypt, and also the deputation of Sayyid Naseeruddin Bayhaqi as an emissary from Sultan Zayn to the Sharif of Mecca and returned with paper inscribed with words of admonitions and advice, motivating Yuz Asaf who had returned to Kashmir. These are the events that are acceptable and genuine.[51]

As such, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Ahmadiyya claims on Rozabal came to be increasingly seen as sacrilegious to mainstream Islamic views on both Jesus and *mahdi* (apocalyptic leader in Islamic eschatology).[52] The Ahmadiyya claims to the shrine and its historiographical basis continued to be contested by several Muslim organisations and individuals in Kashmir. For instance, in 1988, Abdul Rahman Kundu published an edited book in Urdu titled *ʿĪsá ki Qabar Kashmir mīn Nahī (The Grave of Christ Is Not in Kashmir)*, which brought together the views of several South Asian ulema on the shrine. This work attracted the attention of several regional Sunni ulema who subscribed to the traditional Islamic belief of Christ's crucifixion. A similar position was articulated in Qazi Zahoor-ul Hassan's *Nigarīstan-i Kashmir*, which challenged the Ahmadiyya theory on Jesus by portraying it as directly opposed to the dominant understanding of the Quran and the Prophetic traditions on the issue.[53] The exact position is articulated in the work of Muzaffar Ahmad Khan, who contested the views of Ghulam Ahmad and Fida Hasnain by suggesting a re-reading of the accounts of *Wāqiʿāt* and *Asrār*.[54] As such, the dominant position within Kashmir and the larger region of South Asia declared the Ahmadiyya claim to the shrine as blasphemous. Nevertheless, the popularity, importance and glorification of the tradition of Yuz Asaf in Kashmir continues well into the modern historiographical tradition. Nineteenth and twentieth century works such as Haji

48. Paul C. Pappas, *Jesus Tomb in India: A Debate on His Death and Resurrection* (Asian Humanities Press, 1991): 154–55.
49. Joseph Macchio, *The Orthodox Christian Conspiracy: How Church Fathers Suppressed Original Gnostic Christianity* (Infinity Publishing, 2010).
50. Shah, *Ḥālāt*, 7.
51. Ibid.
52. Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts*, 120–21.
53. *Qazi Zahoor ul Hassan, Nigarīstan-i Kashmir* (Gulshan Publisher, 2002): 338–419.
54. Muzaffar Ahmad Khan, *Kashmiri Muslims: An Historical Outline* (Humanizer Publications, 2012): 241–51.

Ghulam Mohiuddin's *Taʾrīkh-i Kabir*, Amir-i-Din Pakwal's *Taḥqīqāt-i Amiri* and Ghulam Nabi Shah's *Wajīz-ul Tawārikh* continuously glorified this tradition in their history writing of Kashmir while following the account of *Wāqiʿāt*.

As such, claims to the shrine in the nineteenth and twentieth century frequently invoked passages from *Wāqiʿāt* and *Asrār* in their debates, which involved a constant reinterpretation of not only the textual accounts of the Rozabal site but also debates over the meaning and implications of terms used in these texts. Modern historians such as Zutshi have argued that Persian historians' incorporation of such traditions was an attempt at framing a 'universal cosmology' for Kashmir by portraying it as a sacred space and a paradise on earth.[55] Observations by colonial officials in Kashmir indicate that such traditions in physical geographies were understood as bringing together diverse religious denominations. Modern observers, such as the Settlement Commissioner of Kashmir Walter Lawrence, wrote:

> Certain places in Kashmir are held in high reverence by both Muslims and Hindus, like the Fatehpura in the Verinag area, and Waripura in the Magam area in which I have seen the imprint of a foot in a stone worshipped by the Mussalmans as *qadam-i rasūl* [footprint of the Prophet], and by the Hindus as *Vishnu-pad* [Vishnu's foot].[56]

As such, it has been argued by modern historians that the cultural and religious milieu of Kashmir is composed of many different traditions of faith and belief systems such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Trika Shaivism and Islam.[57] Like many other sacred sites in Kashmir, various religious and sectarian denominations claimed the Rozabal shrine site and the persons buried therein. This includes Nazir Ahmad's references to a Buddhist claim to the shrine, according to which it was originally a Buddhist stupa, and the person buried inside was named 'Bod-Asaf', not Yuz Asaf.[58] According to *Wāqiʿāt*'s eighteenth century account, one of the persons buried in the shrine was known as Sayyid Naseeruddin, and he was buried there during the reign of Mirza Haider Dughlat (r. 1541–51).[59] Textual accounts indicate that he was a follower of Imam Musa Raza, revered by the Shia, and commanded respect as a Sufi saint in medieval Kashmir.[60]

Currently, the shrine is placed under a local committee of Sunni Muslims. A large signboard displays English and Urdu translations of the Quranic verses 4:157–58 and Mark 16:19 from the Bible. Access to the site is restricted and possible only through a small window that provides a peek into the shrine's interior. The local Department of Tourism has been dealing with requests mainly from foreign researchers seeking 'authentic' information about the site.[61] The Archaeological Department of Jammu and Kashmir describes the site as an 'ancient structure of Kashmir', while

55. Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts*, 1–20.
56. Walter Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (Gulshan Publishers, 2005): 286–88.
57. Mohammad Ishaq Khan, 'The Rishi Tradition and the Construction of Kashmiriyat', in *Lived Islam in South Asia: Adaptation, Accommodation and Conflict*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (Routledge, 2017): 61–82.
58. Based on his argument that 'Īsá (Jesus) and Buddha had similar teachings, Nazir Ahmad notes that the Rozabal structure was originally a Buddhist sacred site and identifies the person buried there as a Buddhist monk. The author does not however add any references to his claim: Khwaja Nazir Ahmad, *Jesus in Heaven on Earth* (Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam, 1953): 388.
59. Dedmari, *Wāqiʿāt*, 82.
60. Hassan, *Nigaristan-i Kashmir*, 398–99.
61. Paul C. Pappas to the Director of Tourism Srinagar, letter, May 16, 1988, Pappas, *Jesus Tomb*, 179.

a signboard displayed at the site describes it as the 'Shrine of Hazrat Yuza Asif and Syed Naseer-ud-Din'.[62]

Conclusion

Building on the concept of the role of hagiographies in constructing sacred spaces, we analyse Dedmari's *Wāqi'āt* and Khuihami's *Asrār* and evaluate how their portrayal of the site of Rozabal in Srinagar led to the creation of a sacred space, the Tomb of Jesus, in modern Kashmir. While the two texts note the relatively obscure origins of the site of Rozabal, at the same time, they put together oral and textual narratives about the site and portray it as an Islamic sacred space of a shrine belonging to a *nabī*. We argue that rather than taking this as a factual statement, this textual description needs to be understood as part of a broader trend in the Persian historiography of Kashmir which, in the process of attempting to link the region of Kashmir to a larger and older Islamic world, portrayed many personalities and spaces and sites in Islamicate terms. The remaking of these spaces in the Persian textual narratives was not only a by-product of the larger process of the spread of Islam in the region but also an essential constituent of the process itself.

An essential concomitant of the spread of Islam in the region was the weaving together of multilingual oral and textual narratives about different shrine sites and saints in Kashmir. Interestingly, rather than being an exclusive feature of Persian texts composed in the earliest stages of the spread of Islam in the region, this narrative trend continued to be a feature of Persian texts as late as the nineteenth century. *Wāqi'āt* and *Asrār* played a critical role in mapping these sites onto the sacred geography of the region by combining narrations from lesser-known oral traditions and textual sources, some of them non-extant, into well-known encyclopaedic works on regional history. This enabled modern movements such as those of the Ahmadiyyas to lay a claim on the shrine, generating debates in which these same texts again came to play a crucial role. We attempt to demonstrate how a myth was transformed and became part of mainstream historiography, and then, on its basis, modern sectarian contestations were shaped. We also underline that this narrative act of constructing sacred spaces, asserting regional uniqueness and connecting the region to the larger Islamicate world had an implicit political purpose. Notably, the region's subjection to Mughal, Afghan and later Dogra polities did not preclude assertions of trans-regional connections with the larger spiritual and religious geographies of the Islamicate world. In the late nineteenth century, the Ahmadiyya interpretation of these texts represented a re-reading of these texts, treating them as repositories of 'facts' to be drawn out, an enterprise that resembled the orientalist and religious reformist reading of the regional literary tradition. In addition to exemplifying a larger pattern of modern re-reading of premodern and early modern texts, the Ahmadiyya engagement with *Wāqi'āt* and *Asrār* demonstrates how these texts continue to live on in new contexts.

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62. Director of Tourism Srinagar, letter, April 6, 1988, quoted in Pappas, *Jesus Tomb*, 180.

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