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GISing Baybars: Unraveling the Odd Location of Maqām Nabī Mūsá

In a paper that critically analyzes Sultan Baybars's construction inscription at Maqām Nabī Mūsá, Reuven Amitai concludes his analysis with the following musing:

> I have often wondered what was the point of some Arabic inscriptions, which are located in positions that make reading them very difficult if not nearly impossible. At the same time, they are often written in such a stylized manner that even a trained epigrapher has trouble deciphering them. This is a point worthy of further enquiry and thought. In any event, the present inscription is different. It is placed relatively low, is accessible to the eye, and the style of the writing does not pose much of a problem. Here, at least, the inscription was intended to be read, and the visitor to the Maqam had the opportunity to peruse its contents and to meditate on its message of power and piety.[1]

Indeed, I have often pondered exactly the same riddle as I strolled the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem while surveying monumental and vernacular Mamluk architecture.[2] Amitai is correct in suggesting that in comparison with other Mamluk inscriptions, the inscription in Nabī Mūsá is more approachable and more legible. Yet, in my many visits to the site in question, and certainly in my visits to other Mamluk buildings (whether in Jerusalem, Safad, Gaza, or Cairo), never have I seen pilgrims or visitors taking the time or trouble to try and decipher those elaborate inauguration inscriptions. So, the puzzle remains. However, this is surely not the only question that hovers above this unique shrine. From early on—indeed prior to its construction by Sultan Baybars—and up to the present, this shrine has been shrouded in myths and conflicts and marred with contestation. Muslim scholars debated the "true" location of Moses's grave

[1] Reuven Amitai, "Some Remarks on the Inscription of Baybars at Maqam Nabi Musa," in *Mamluks and Ottomans. Studies in Honor of Michael Winter,* ed. David J. Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon (London, 2006), 51.

[2] The survey was part of a Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Reuven Amitai, which was ultimately published as Nimrod Luz, *The Mamluk City in the Middle East: History, Culture and Urban Landscape* (Cambridge, 2014). Objectively and unequivocally a super supervisor!

DOI: 10.6082/xmah-w345. (https://doi.org/10.6082/xmah-w345)
DOI of Vol. XXVII: 10.6082/msr27. See https://doi.org/10.6082/msr2024 to download the full volume or individual articles.

for centuries before and after its concrete construction at its current location.[3] Another complicating issue is the way Muslim traditions disregarded the basic tenet suggested in the Bible regarding Moses's tomb being located east of the Jordan River. And most recently, we have also witnessed the efforts of the Palestinian Authority to use the site for its political advantage.[4]

Following its construction in the thirteenth century, the shrine quickly became one of the central Muslim pilgrimage sites in southern Bilād al-Shām. It became the primal location for a seasonal pilgrimage *(mawsim)* which was intentionally scheduled to compete with the annual tide of Christian pilgrims before and during the Greek Orthodox Easter.[5] In the twentieth century, the Nabī Mūsá compound (grave, mosque, *ribāṭ*) became pivotal in the emerging Palestinian national struggle. The annual festivities therein were instrumentally, and rather skillfully, used by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Ḥajj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, to bolster Palestinian nationalism and confront both the British and their Jewish adversaries during the Mandate period in the region (1920–48).[6] Maqām Nabī Mūsá's contested history, conflicting traditions as to its "true" location, and surely the role it played in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict all make for a fascinating case in point to explore the ample ways sacred places are constructed, produced, and perceived by different stakeholders and groups. In this paper, I aim to demystify some of the enigmas regarding this pilgrimage and sacred place, focusing mostly on offering an explanation of its rather humble and seemingly problematic and inaccessible location. To that end, the paper starts with a theoretical analysis regarding the inherently contested nature of sacred places. This is followed with an examination of the site's location and situation to demonstrate how problematic and, moreover, intriguing the location chosen for this compound is. Next, I focus on the crucial role of Sultan Baybars and his motivations in constructing the compound, as found in Mujīr al-Dīn's narration. The final part of the paper engages in a Geographic Information System (GIS) inquiry into the location of Nabī Mūsá. This, I argue, allows for a better under-

[3] Joseph Sadan, "The Holy Site (Maqām) of Nabī Mūsā, between Jericho and Damascus: A History of a Competition between Sacred Places [in Hebrew]," *Ha-Mizraḥ he-Ḥadash (The New East)* 28, nos. 1–2 (1979): 22–38; idem, "The Dispute Concerning the Maqām of Nabī Mūsā in the Muslim Sources [in Hebrew]," *Ha-Mizraḥ he-Ḥadash (The New East)* 28, nos. 3–4 (1980): 220–38; Amikam Elad, "Some Aspects of the Islamic Traditions Regarding the Site of the Grave of Moses," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 11 (1985): 1–15.

[4] Ifrach Zilberman, "The Renewal of the Pilgrimage to Nabi Musa," in *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine,* ed. Berger Marshall, Yitzhak Reiter, and Leonard Hammer (New York, 2012), 103–15.

[5] Tawfik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London, 1927), 195–96.

[6] Roger Friedland and Richard D. Hecht, "The Nebi Musa Pilgrimage and the Origins of Palestinian Nationalism," in *Pilgrims and Travelers to the Holy Land,* ed. Bryan F. LeBeau and Menahem Mor (Omaha, 1996), 89–118.

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DOI of Vol. XXVII: 10.6082/msr27. See https://doi.org/10.6082/msr2024 to download the full volume or individual articles.

standing of Baybars's motivations for locating the disputed tradition of Moses's burial ground in an unlikely, mostly unseen, and rather inaccessible location.

Places and the Contested Nature of Sacred Places

Geographical definitions of place since the 1970s have focused on the combination of location and meaning and the human subject's crucial importance in the construction of place.[7] Place is certainly a phenomenon, a location, but at the same time, it is a concept, a product, and a process in which humans are involved. The following is a rather useful definition for understanding place as a socially constructed entity: "place is space to which meaning has been ascribed."[8] As a product, place cannot be reduced to its mere physical qualities. It is the outcome and process of human endeavors. In his invariably persuasive manner, Foucault observed that place is fundamental in any exercise of power.[9] Put differently, places are, by their very natures, political entities, or at least are politicized through various human agencies. Place is replete with power and symbolism; at the same time, place is inexorably linked with controversies, conflicts, struggles over control, and debates (as well as actual physical conflict) over meaning and symbolism.

Sacred places make rather intriguing examples of the socio-political and constructed character of place. Geographers dealing with religion have pointed to the presence of conflict and contestation involved in the production of sacred sites.[10] "A sacred place is not merely discovered, or founded, or constructed; it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests."[11] Becoming a sacred place, therefore, involves a process of production, but it is also inescapably linked to cultural-political contests regarding the multiple meanings assigned to the place. The conflict is not just over the production, but also

[7] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977); Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Malden, 2014).

[8] Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London, 1993), xii.

[9] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York, 1980), 63.

[10] Christine Chivallon, "Religion as Space for the Expression of Caribbean Identity in the United Kingdom," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19, no. 4 (2001): 461–83; Lily Kong, "Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity," *Progress in Human Geography* 25 (2001): 211–33; Simon Naylor and James Ryan, "The Mosque in the Suburbs: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in South London," *Social and Cultural Geography* 3, no. 1 (2002): 39–59.

[11] David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, "Introduction," in *American Sacred Space,* ed. David Chidester and Edward Linenthal (Bloomington, 1995), 17.

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over the "symbolic surpluses that are abundantly available for appropriation."[12] Thus, sacred sites are intrinsically arenas where resources are transformed into surplus of meaning and often contested and fought over by various forces.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the construction of Maqām Nabī Mūsá in its specific location is to be understood as a highly political move on the part of Sultan Baybars. Further—and not surprisingly—it needs to be analyzed as part of an endeavor to claim and construct a place to serve specific interests of its builder. Indeed, in the remaining parts of this paper I will suggest such a political motivation. With this in mind, let us now explore the unique geography of this sacred place, which is essential to understanding Baybars's project in Nabī Mūsá.

Nabī Mūsá Near al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar: Site and Situation

Maqām Nabī Mūsá is located in a rather remote and inaccessible site in the northeastern part of the Judean Desert, about 15 km due east of Jerusalem and some 8 km southwest of Jericho (31°47′N 35°26′E). In the numerous Islamic traditions that mention the grave of Moses, it is often connected and associated with al-Kathīb al-Aḥmar, namely, the Red Hill. One such variant is narrated by Abū Hurayrah:

> The Angel of Death was sent to Moses. When he came to Moses, Moses slapped him on the eye. The angel returned to his Lord and said, "You have sent me to a slave who does not want to die." Allah said, "Return to him and tell him to put his hand on the back of an ox and for every hair that will come under it, he will be granted one year of life." Moses said, "O Lord! What will happen after that?" Allah replied, "Then death." Moses said, "Let it come now." Moses then requested Allah to let him die close to the Sacred Land, so much so that he would be at a distance of a stone's throw from it. Abu Huraira added, "Allah's Apostle said: If I were there, I would show you his grave below the red sand hill on the side of the road."[13]

In a different version of this tradition, we learn that during the Prophet's night journey *(al-isrā')*, he passed over the grave of Moses which is found near

[12] Ibid., 18.

[13] Al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 4, 55, 619. Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* in Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Shaykh, *Al-Kutub al-sittah* (Riyadh, 1419/1999), 1:104.

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"the Red Hill."[14] The association of the tomb with red sand puts us squarely in the Nabī Mūsá region, which is dominated by a unique and variegated rock formation called Hatrurim or Mottled Zone.[15] This is a geological formation that can be found all around the Dead Sea basin. The rocks of this formation have been subjected to (pyro)metamorphism resulting from combustion of hydrocarbon deposits, which resulted also in their very dominant red color.[16] This lent its name to several sites in the region with the suffix Edumin (Hebrew: red) or Aḥmar (Arabic: red), as the case may be.

The Nabī Mūsá compound was built in between two local catchment areas, Wādī Qalṭ to its north and Wādī Og (or Mukāliq) to its south.[17] Consequently, it is not part of the local road system that developed organically along the main ravines in the region. It is also not a station on the main historical road that connected Jerusalem to the Jericho region. This historical route was first paved during the British Mandate (1920–48), but even then, Nabī Mūsá was not part of it and the pilgrims were compelled to take a southern detour of a few kilometers to reach their destination from the main road. Another possible route that could have served pilgrims was along Wādī Og, which connected Jerusalem and the Christian monasteries of Khān al-Aḥmar (yet another reminder of the red rock formation in the area) and St. Euthymius, and from there eastward to the Dead Sea basin, but this route also fails to arrive at Nabī Mūsá. It traverses the valley of Nabī Mūsá a few kilometers south of the compound. Ultimately, there are several main routes in the compound's vicinity, but none of them serves it directly. Since its construction in the thirteenth century, pilgrims have been forced to use bifurcations from the main roads in the compound's vicinity. This was summed up rather harshly by the Jerusalemite qadi and chronicler Mujīr al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī al-ʿUlaymī (hereafter, Mujīr al-Dīn), who described the site over two hundred years after it was inaugurated: "and the road to it is difficult and full of bumps and obstacles."[18] The inaccessibility of the place also troubled one of the most renowned travelers and scholars to have roamed the region in the nineteenth century, Victor Guérin. He visited the Holy Land no less than eight times between 1852 and 1888, during which he wrote an award-winning seven-volume series titled *A Geographical, Historical, and Archaeological Description*

[14] Elad, "Some Aspects of Islamic Traditions."

[15] Shulamit Gross, "Petrographic Atlas of the Hatrurim Formation," *Geological Survey of Israel,* https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/publications/reports/gross-et-al-report-2016.

[16] Avihu Burg, Yehoshua Kolodny, and Vladimir Lyakhovsky, "Hatrurim-2000: The 'Mottled Zone' Revisited, Forty Years Later," *Israel Journal of Earth Sciences* 48, nos. 3–4 (1999): 209–23.

[17] https://www.govmap.gov.il/?c=242479.53,631909.45&z=4&lay=BASIN.

[18] Mujīr al-Dīn al-Ḥanbalī al-ʿUlaymī, *Al-Uns al-jalīl bi-tārīkh al-Quds wa-al-Khalīl* (Baghdad, 1995), 1:102.

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of Palestine. Guérin and his company arrived at Nabī Mūsá from the Mar Saba monastery along the Wādī Og route. This is his description of the road he was forced to take in order to arrive at the maqām:

> On April 3rd, seven AM, under a clearing sky we mounted our horses again and rode on a very narrow path that was very slippery since it had rained during the last few days. The path wound through hills and valleys. And those valleys are mostly ferocious valleys of death. . . . our path twisted and turned.[19]

Guérin further narrates how he had to negotiate on that winding and dangerous path no less than six local streams, before he could finally arrive at the gates of Nabī Mūsá. And surely he was not the only seasoned traveler to experience difficulties while trying to arrive at the site from Jerusalem via the local desert paths. Dr. Natan Shalem (1899–59), a geologist and seasoned traveler, was one of the founders of the "Land of Israel Wandering Society," which promoted hiking as a way for Jews to become connected to the land during the British Mandate. On one such hike, he tried to follow the path from Jerusalem to Nabī Mūsá with a group of travelers:

> After a few moments we arrived at a dead end. . . . We stood there clueless, with no possible route out, left or right, the desert closed in on us. Some of us were climbing the surrounding hills to explore the area. Luckily for us, we encountered two Arab horsemen from the Desert Guards who were on their way to Nabi Musa and so we safely followed them.[20]

One may wonder: if such veteran hikers got lost while trying to find this pilgrimage site, what was the outcome for the innocent, inexperienced pilgrims over the years who tried to find the place and perform their pilgrimage? To make matters even more difficult, the location chosen for the construction of the site is in a local syncline. This essentially means that the site is not visible, even from a very short distance. It is also invisible from further away, and—due to its unique position in a valley—even from relatively high places in its vicinity. That said, as I approach the concluding parts of this paper, I will highlight one particular mountain in the region from which the Nabī Mūsá complex is highly visible.

The site and situation of this sacred compound seem at first glance to be rather problematic. When one considers its inaccessibility and low visibility to

[19] Victor Guérin, A *Geographical, Historical, and Archaeological Description of Palestine* [in Hebrew] (Paris, 1868; repr. Jerusalem, 1983), 4:12–13.

[20] Natan Shalem, *Collection of Essays* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1973), 404.

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both its immediate and more remote surroundings, one is bound to question Baybars's choice to construct the maqām in its current place. Put simply, this does not seem like a prime location, either for promoting the site as an Islamic pilgrimage center or for explaining the builder's motivation to construct the place in such an unlikely spot. To better understand Baybars's motivation to build this site, I will next discuss the architectural development of Nabī Mūsá through the narration provided to us by Mujīr al-Dīn, complemented with an analysis of Baybars's Islamization project in Bilād al-Shām. This, I argue, will set the background for understanding Baybars's motivation and preferences while concretizing an early tradition in this specific place.

Nabī Mūsá and Baybars's Islamization Project in Bilād al-Shām

The first line in the lengthy and rather detailed construction inscription of Nabī Mūsá assures us of the identity of the person responsible for the building project:

> In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. "They only shall manage Allah's places of worship who have believed in Allah and the last day." Ordered the building of this noble sacred place over the Tomb of Moses, the speaker (with God)—prayer and peace upon him—our lord, the Sultan al-Malik al-Ẓāhir.[21]

While analyzing this inscription, Amitai sets the context of the construction project within the framework of one of Baybars's covert expeditions in Syria as he was on his way from Damascus to Jerusalem.[22] This probably took place in late 1269, following Baybars's visit to Mecca to perform the hajj. A slightly different chain of events, which certainly does not change the ultimate result, is suggested in the most detailed description of the building project, as narrated by Mujīr al-Dīn:

> The people argued about the place of the Prophet Moses' tomb, but what most of them agreed upon was that it is located east of Jerusalem within a day's walking distance. And the road to it is difficult and full of bumps and hurdles. On top of the tomb there is a mosque and to its right there is a dome made of stone and underneath it there lies the tomb. During the days of the pilgrimage, a black cloth is laid upon the tomb and on it a red embroidery cov-

[21] See Amitai, "Some Remarks on the Inscription," 47.

[22] Ibid., 48.

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> ered in gold on its sides. Most people believe this is the site of the grave. It is narrated in the *Saḥīḥ* that the Prophet met him [Moses] during the Night Journey and prayed on his tomb at the Red Hill.
>
> The one who built the said dome is al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybars, as he was returning from the hajj and after he visited Jerusalem in 668[/1269]. Only afterward were additional buildings constructed for the benefit of the pilgrims. In 875[/1470] the mosque was enlarged on its south side and the construction was only finished in 885[/1480]. After that year a minaret was built at the site. This place [i.e., the entire compound] is located south of Jericho and the people of Jerusalem perform pilgrimage to it for an entire week following the end of the rainy season.[23]

If we accept Mujīr al-Dīn's description, the compound underwent three major building phases within the Mamluk period. The initial phase was undertaken by Sultan Baybars in 1269.[24] This was also the most crucial one, as by ordering construction at this particular site, Baybars effectively ended a lengthy dispute regarding the exact place of Moses's burial ground.[25] The second phase, which probably took place shortly after, entailed service buildings at the flanks of the mosque to be used during the annual pilgrimage. The third phase took place during the reign al-Malik al-Ashraf Qāytbāy (r. 1468–96), and included the construction of a minaret and enlargement of the mosque area on its south side.

The construction of Maqām Nabī Mūsá was not a singular project executed under Baybars. On the contrary, Baybars was heavily engaged with building projects of a hagio-religious nature. As such, he ordered the renovation of mosques in Ramlah, initiated the construction of Mazār Abū ʿUbaydah in the eastern part of the northern Jordan Valley, and supported Sufi activities in Jerusalem by allowing them to reuse former Christian buildings.[26] This needs to be viewed also against the backdrop of an anti-Crusader, and surely anti-Christian, campaign that raged across al-Shām during the thirteenth century.[27] Following the conquest of Safad (1266), Baybars ordered the construction of several reli-

[23] Mujīr al-Dīn, *Uns al-jalīl,* 1:102.

[24] For a detailed architectonic survey and dating of specific parts within the compound, see Shmuel Tamari, "Maqam Nabi Musa near Jericho [in Hebrew]," *Cathedra* 11 (1979): 153–80.

[25] On this dispute, see Sadan, "The Holy Site."

[26] Yehoshua Frenkel, "Baybars and the Sacred Geography of Bilad al-Sham: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 153–70.

[27] Nimrod Luz, "Aspects of Islamization of Space and Society in Mamluk Jerusalem and its Hinterland," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 133–54.

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gious buildings in the budding new city.[28] One of them was the Red Mosque and the construction inscription that still graces its gate clearly expresses both the piety and the anti-Christian sentiments the builder wishes to convey:

> In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This blessed mosque was built by the instructions of our lord and the Sultan al-Malik al-Ẓāhir, the most great and magnificent master, the wise, the just, the defender of the faith, warrior along the borders, the victorious, supporter of faith and the world, sultan of Islam and Muslims, slayer of the infidels and the heathens, capitulator of rebels and conspirators, Baybars al-Ṣāliḥī, partner of the commander of the faithful, and this in the year four and seventy and six hundred [1276].[29]

Surely, one may argue that these inscriptions follow a formula and need not be interpreted as overly representative or indicative of the policy or even ideology of the individual concerned. And yet, in the case of Baybars, this is only one of numerous projects, and it is moreover emblematic of his general militant anti-Christian policy. As previously observed by Amitai, the titles and various terms used in Baybars's numerous inscriptions convey a picture of:

> a tough fighter in the name of Islam, an impression certainly strengthened by Baybars's behavior on the battlefield and in day-to-day affairs. Perhaps no less important than his image as *mujahid,* "holy warrior," and a just Muslim sultan, is that of the *Heerkönig,* to use P. M. Holt's very apt term.[30]

It is exactly along these lines and against this background that I suggest in what follows that the construction of Nabī Mūsá in this particular humble and unlikely site was part of an anti-Christian strategy that is highly distinctive of this formidable sultan.

Nabī Mūsá and Baybars: Decoding the Move to the Locative Pole

The concretization of an oral and intangible tradition into a specific and tangible location, especially when this very location is in dispute, entails power and certainly follows a specific interest of the localizing person or group. This

[28] Luz, *The Mamluk City in the Middle East,* 33–36.

[29] Ibid., 160.

[30] Amitai, "Some Remarks on the Inscription," 51; P. M. Holt, "The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38 (1975): 237–49, esp. 246.

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is what I previously discussed under the heading of the "contested nature of sacred places." In the case at hand, I would argue that by constructing Nabī Mūsá in its specific location, Baybars was utilizing his power as sultan to create a certain sacred landscape that served his interests and ideology. As previously noted, Baybars conducted an unrelenting anti-Christian policy in Bilād al-Shām. In what follows, I focus on the specificities of his Nabī Mūsá project to decipher, indeed decode, Baybars's decision to construct the shrine in this exact location. To do so, I start with a description of Muslim pilgrims' activities at Nabī Mūsá as narrated by Felix Fabri, a Dominican monk who made at least two excursions to the region in the late fifteenth century. He left us a rather detailed account of his pilgrimage, which is commonly known as *The Book of the Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri*.[31]

Fabri had a sharp and critical eye, and regularly broached topics that far exceed the ordinary purview of other Christian travelers. The following description is part of a very detailed section dedicated to the part of his journey, indeed pilgrimage, through the Judean Desert:

> After viewing the aforesaid places, we cast our eyes upon the place where we stood, where we saw many heaps of stones, piled up by the Saracens. . . . The Saracens pile up these stones in honour of Moses, because from this place one can distinctly see the mountains of Abarim and the peak of Pisgah, from whence Moses beheld the heritage of the Lord. . . . For this cause Saracens, when they come to this place, make piles of stones, and pray, looking towards the mount on their bended knees. . . . Not far from these heaps we saw a high and newly-built pyramid, beneath which the Saracens falsely say that Moses is buried—a thing contrary to the canon of the Bible, in the last chapter of Deuteronomy. Thus, they do in all other matters; they follow the Bible when they please, but when they do not, they obstinately contradict it, in spite of (its) truth.[32]

In this criticism of Islam and Muslims, Fabri refers of course to the Biblical account according to which Moses was buried east of the Jordan River, near Mount Nebo. What is particularly important in this description is that from Nabī Mūsá one can see the tops of the mountains in the ridge named Abarim, one of which is Mount Nebo. Further, there exists a well-established tradition among Muslims and Christians to pray from this area while facing east and commemorat-

[31] Felix Fabri, *The Book of Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri,* trans. Aubrey Stewart, The Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society, vols. 7–10 (London, 1897).

[32] Ibid., 9:188.

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ing Moses.[33] This intriguing activity inspired me to inquire what exactly can be seen from Maqām Nabī Mūsá while looking east, and equally, from which mountains' tops can the maqām be observed. To that end, visibility lines between the Nabī Mūsá area and the mountain ridge east of it were examined by performing a Geographic Information System (commonly known as GIS) analysis.[34] Figure 2 below depicts visibility lines from Mount Nebo.

The area surrounding Nabī Mūsá is mostly unseen from the peak of the mountain and yet the immediate vicinity of the maqām is visible to anyone standing at the church that was constructed on top of Mount Nebo during late antiquity.[35] The church is dedicated to Moses, who according to the Christian understanding (that follows the Biblical description) was buried at that very spot after observing the land of Canaan, which God forbade him to enter. Figure 3 depicts the visible and blind spots when one looks from Nabī Mūsá east to Mount Nebo.

It is not surprising that Mount Nebo is observable from Nabī Mūsá. Yet, what is very intriguing is that this is true only for a very specific and small area in the vicinity of the maqām. This is also apparent when conflating the two locations. Figure 4 helps us better understand the uniqueness of Baybars's undertaking in that specific spot. As one moves away from Nabī Mūsá, the possibility to see, or be seen from, Mount Nebo diminishes rapidly.

Thus, GISing Baybars's project allows for a better understanding of his motivations to move the locative pole of the "Red Sand Hill" tradition to this very site. By constructing the Nabī Mūsá compound at this specific location, Baybars was not only providing local Muslim pilgrims with yet another sacred destination, but also supplying them with a bastion in the ongoing Muslim-Christian contestation over the Holy Land. In addition to setting the site in a place that visibly, and rather conspicuously, challenges the Judeo-Christian location of the same tradition, the annual *mawsim* of Nabī Mūsá did not adhere, as might be expected, to the hijri calendar but rather responded to and was in sync with the Christian liturgical one. The Nabī Mūsá pilgrimage was a response to the Greek Orthodox calendar and the festivities revolving around Easter, during which numerous seasonal Christian pilgrims would arrive in the region. The march to Nabī Mūsá started from Jerusalem on the Friday preceding the Christian celebration of Good Friday. The return to Jerusalem was a week later, on

[33] This idea was also suggested by Braslavsky, who pointed out that the Muslims pray from specific places as they challenge other contradicting traditions. For his assessment of the Nabī Mūsá location, see Joseph Braslavsky, *Studies in Our Country: Its Past and Remains* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1954), 326. I would like to thank Mr. Zeev Erlich for supplying me with this reference.

[34] I am indebted to Dr. Mitia Frumin for conducting this analysis on my behalf.

[35] Michele Piccirillo, "New Discoveries on Mount Nebo," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities* 21 (1976): 55–59.

DOI: 10.6082/xmah-w345. (https://doi.org/10.6082/xmah-w345)
DOI of Vol. XXVII: 10.6082/msr27. See https://doi.org/10.6082/msr2024 to download the full volume or individual articles.

Holy Thursday, which is also a festive Christian day that precedes Good Friday, the day commemorating Jesus's crucifixion.[36]

These anti-Christian sentiments that characterize Baybars's general attitude are also apparent in a tradition narrated by Mujīr al-Dīn. According to this tradition, Baybars visited Jerusalem in 668/1269 and during that time he ordered the construction of Maqām Nabī Mūsá. While there he also performed a pilgrimage (Arabic: *ziyārah*) to the site. On his way, he passed a monastery named Dayr Siqq. Upon learning that there were around three hundred monks in this monastery, he ordered the destruction of all the monks' cells to ensure "the safety of Jerusalem."[37]

When one considers the specific location of the maqām, the annual date of the pilgrimage and festivities therein, and surely Baybars's aggressive and relentless policy towards the Christians, one is bound to agree that this building project was part of an anti-Christian agenda and Baybars's general conduct of presenting himself as a devout Muslim and, moreover, a relentless *mujāhid*. The GIS analysis of the location chosen for the maqām supports this interpretation of Baybars's motivation and, furthermore, his overarching goal in constructing this sacred place.

Conclusions

This paper set out to explore the unique location of Maqām Nabī Mūsá and to explain it in relation to Sultan Baybars's general anti-Christian policy, entangled with his ambition to present himself as a just and devout Muslim ruler. To that end, I started with a discussion of the inherent contested nature of sacred places. This places the act of locating Nabī Mūsá in context and vividly explains why sacred places are by their very essence a contested category. They are replete with symbolism and meaning which are up for grabs by forces struggling over ownership, heritage, memory, and surely their right of access. This was followed by a geographic analysis of the site and the intriguing aspects of its location. After presenting the problematics involved in this location, mostly its inaccessibility and very limited visibility, a short assessment of Baybars's Islamization policy and prominent anti-Christian attitude followed. In the final part of the paper, the specific location of Nabī Mūsá was explored by utilizing GIS. This allows an understanding of Baybars's motivation to locate the (contested) tradition of Nabī Mūsá at this specific location. It is surely part of this energetic

[36] Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints,* 195–96. See also Adel Manna, "*The Development of the Cultural Identity of Arab Society in the Land of Israel," in The History of the Land of Israel: Late Ottoman Period [in Hebrew], ed.* Yehoshua Ben-Arieh *and* Israel Bartal *(Jerusalem, 1983), vol. 8:2, 178–80.*

[37] Mujīr al-Dīn, *Uns al-jalīl,* 2:87.

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sultan's project of Islamization of the Holy Land through numerous constructions of sacred places.

As is well known, the construction of sacred places was part and parcel of Baybars's general anti-Crusader policy. This was executed through a multifaceted struggle, involving military, economic, and indeed religio-symbolic, undertakings. That said, Maqām Nabī Mūsá is a fascinating case in point of a much larger and more fundamental discussion, which is the making of the sacred. The construction of sacred places involves a move from the intangible (oral or written tradition) to the tangible, that is, the emergence of a concrete place within a very specific geography. Put differently, the process of constructing sacred landscape is inexorably linked to the inquiry into how places become sacred. Like with other places, the casting in stone of abstract ideas, even if they are in dispute, is a crucial step toward the acceptance of a specific tradition. The construction of the Dome of the Rock ultimately ended the lengthy debate among scholars as to the exact destination of the Prophet's night journey. The same is true for the construction of the Holy Sepulcher, and indeed many other Christian sacred places that emerged in the Holy Land mostly during the fourth to sixth centuries. Any disputes, conflicts, and competitions regarding the exact location of a certain site cannot, in the long run, stand against the materialization of the mythology concerned. Once this new reality emerges, the rituals performed therein will ultimately cement and validate this specific interpretation. By constructing Maqām Nabī Mūsá, Baybars positioned himself in a clear and unequivocal fashion as a champion of Islam in the region. Building the maqām in this specific location conveys a very clear and challenging message to the Christians as to the validity of their tradition regarding Moses's grave. Moreover, it is also a strong statement of Islamic ownership and hegemonic position in the Holy Land, forged in a time of ongoing struggle with Christian forces there.

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Figure 1: The area between Nabī Mūsá and Mount Nebo. The red dot represents Nabī Mūsá, and the blue dot is Mount Nebo. In between the two, one observes the northern tip of the Dead Sea, and to its north, the Valley of Jericho.

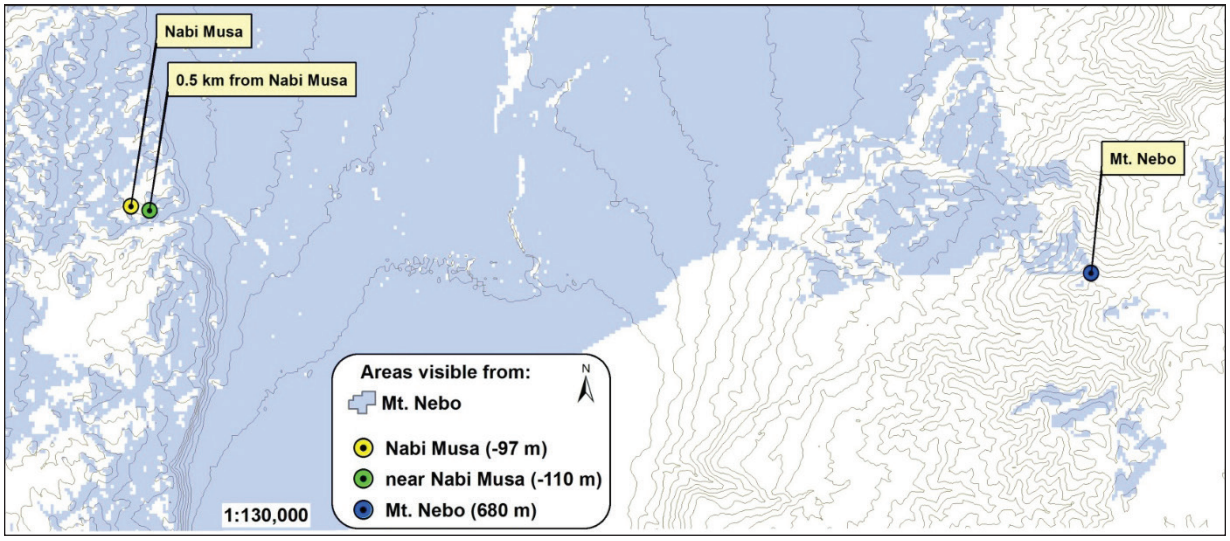

Figure 2: Areas visible from Mount Nebo.

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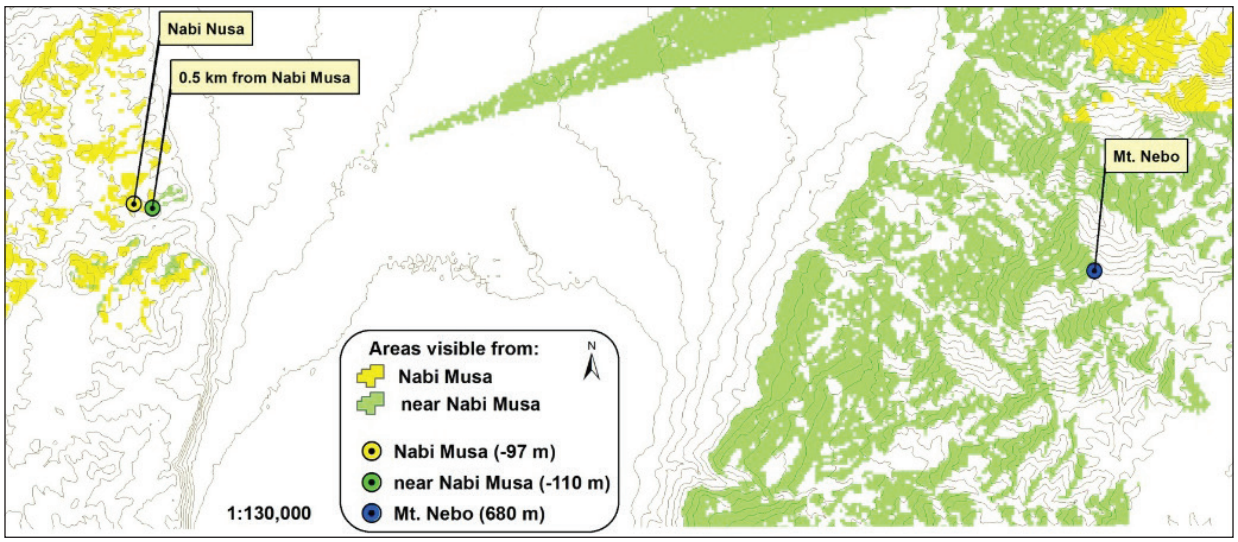

Figure 3: Areas visible from Nabī Mūsá

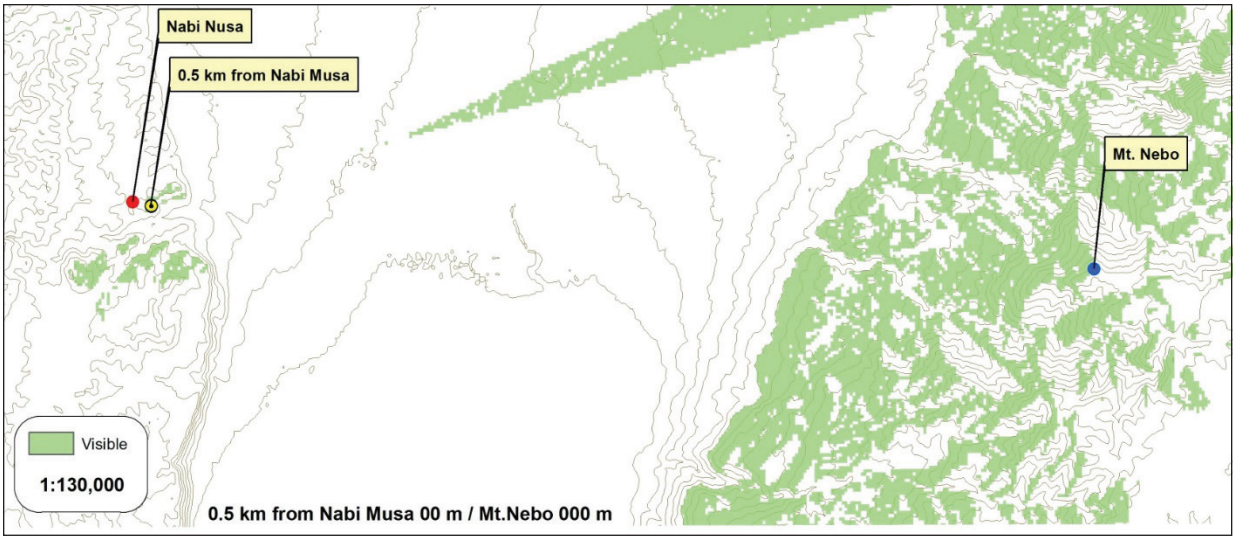

Figure 4: Visibility lines from Mount Nebo and Nabī Mūsá

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