

VISITING THE GRAVE OF IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ

Muzaffar Iqbal

“I had forbidden you to visit graves, but Muḥammad has been permitted to visit the grave of his mother, so visit them, for truly, they remind you of the hereafter.” (Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-Janā’iz, mā jā’a fil-rukḥṣa fi ziyārat al-qubūr)

I arrived in Mashhad after a long night’s journey which took place as if in a dream world, in and out of this earthly existence. I felt a stranger in the city, a poor beggar who had come seeking His bounties. I had wanted to travel from Rayy to Tus on the old caravan route, following the footsteps of countless travelers of centuries past when Tus was the regional capital and a powerful city. Then, caravans travelled between Baghdad and Tus carrying goods, merchants, scholars, students, and all sorts of other people. Today, most traffic passes through Tehran, which claims nearly one-fifth of the total population of Iran; Rayy, just outside modern Tehran, is now only a sleepy though exquisite small town. The old caravans are gone and instead a modern fleet of buses departs to all destinations from Tehran’s two main bus terminals. I had hoped to at least catch glimpses of the old caravan route from the bus, but all buses left after dark and drove through the night to reach Mashhad at dawn, bringing scores of pilgrims to the most venerated site in Iran, the shrine of Imam Reza.

When the bus arrived, the terminal in Mashhad was still asleep. Most of the passengers were also asleep and only awoke when the driver stopped the bus with a jerk. I picked up my suitcase and walked a few meters toward a city-bus which soon took the few passengers to the vicinity of the shrine. As I

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stepped out into the early morning calm, a young man appeared and took me to one, then another hotel, where I decided to lodge.

After a quick shower, I hurried toward the shrine of Imam Reza. The vast complex which surrounds his grave also contains the historic Goharshād Maṣjid, a museum, a library, four seminaries, a cemetery, the Rezavi University of Islamic Sciences, a dining hall for pilgrims, expansive prayer halls, seven vast courtyards, and other buildings. I walked through various courtyards and arrived at the heart of the complex, the enclosure which has the grave of Imam Reza. It was full of early morning visitors paying homage to the Imam, sitting, standing, reclining—a place full of remembrance and devotion. I stood by the grave for what seemed to be an eternity, travelling back in time to the day when the Imam was poisoned on the orders of the ‘Abbasid Caliph Ma’mūn in Ṣafar 203/May 819.

When I left the shrine, it had become even more crowded. I walked through the inner sections of the complex; the walls and floors were studded with gold, silver, glass, gems, and other precious stones. Pilgrims were sitting on exquisite carpets. Despite the presence of a large crowd, the place was filled with serenity and calm.

Early the next day I set out to visit the grave of Imam al-Ghazālī. All I knew about its whereabouts was what the tourism department of the province of Khorasan had listed in an official brochure: it was in Tus, inside the “Harunieh Garden, the large, crumbling, quadrangular domed mausoleum, in the vicinity of Firdowsī’s mausoleum, the only remaining structure of the original city of Tus. Tus is 22 km northeast of Mashhad, on a turning east of the road to Gorgan and alongside the Quchan road... Tus can be reached by bus from Shohada Square in Mashhad. Bus line 20 from Shohada Square will take you there.”

The bus left Shohada square and passed through the city, entering an industrial area where the well-paved asphalt turned into a broken dusty path with massive potholes. The bus dropped off and picked up passengers, and after an hour arrived at the village of Tus, which was variously spelled along the way as Tūs and Tūs. It stopped at the village and most of the passengers got off. When the bus left the village, the road returned to high-quality asphalt. The next stop was what seemed to be the Harunieh Garden described in the tourism department’s pamphlet, but I continued to the final destination of the bus, the Arāmgah-e Firdowsī, the resting place of Firdowsī, about a kilometer from the Harunieh, where the bus came to its final stop just outside the mausoleum which stood inside a garden in splendid isolation.



The Harunieh before archeological restoration, Archeological Survey of Khorasan. ©Al-Qalam Publishing

I asked for Harunieh and was directed back to the old structure where the bus had stopped a few minutes ago. I walked back on a narrow, tree-lined path. Young boys were playing, teenagers were riding their motor bikes back and forth, a man was making kababs, an old man was pushing a children's swing along on shaky wheels. Low hills in the distance were barren against patches of greenery. The Harunieh Garden was enclosed within a short brick wall topped with an iron grill. There was a tuck shop and a ticket booth at the entrance. I asked at the tuck shop about the grave of Imam al-Ghazālī. One of the two men there pointed to the grave inside the enclosure and said that it was merely a commemorative grave, while the real grave lay outside the walls of Tus, about two kilometers away. When I mentioned the pamphlet of the tourism department, he became impatient and repeated what he had said. I decided to go in and bought the entry ticket, but then saw a tour guide walking toward the entrance with a Western tourist. As he passed by me, I asked him about the grave and he said more or less the same thing: "The commemorative grave is that one," he said pointing to a grave inside the enclosure, "but the real grave is outside Tus, about two kilometers from here. I can take you there. Do you have a car?"

"No," I answered.

“Well, then!”

"Just tell me where it is."

"You see the clay rampart of the old city?—that wall over there. It covers a

radius of about six kilometers. From here, you go to the Firdowsi mausoleum, but turn left just before its gate; head straight all the way to the wall, go to the other side of the wall and you will see it on your right; they discovered it about three years ago.”

“Is it marked?”

“Yes, his name is written with bricks there. It is a large grave; you will see it.”

Once inside the entrance, the Harunieh Garden turned out to be a place different from what it seemed: the building was a well-kept enclosure with marvelous calligraphy and relics of the past. Harunieh is popularly associated with Hārūn al-Rashīd, whose remains are generally accepted to have been buried near those of Imam Reza at Mashhad, but no one knows exactly for whom it was built, when, or why. Some consider it to have been a dervish monastery for some time.



The Harunieh, 2004. ©Al-Qalam Publishing

The “commemorative grave” was a short distance from the main entrance. It had the inscription: *Bayād Imam al-Ghazālī* (“In Memory of Imam al-Ghazālī”). It stood outside the main enclosure built of small bricks. The brick building had a tall decorative door which had been recently restored using similar wood. Inside, beautiful Qur’ānic inscriptions adorned the walls. A large wooden chest stood along one wall. The ceiling was bare, but there were vestigial signs of embellishments which had either been stolen or otherwise removed.

As I walked out, I saw the tourist guide still standing at the entrance with the tourist. We exchanged salams and I walked back toward the Firdowsi mausoleum on the same path I had traversed a little while ago. Turning left

before the mausoleum, I entered a bazaar just outside the residential area. There were various shops selling fresh vegetables and fruit. Many people were sitting on stones or by the side of the road in the pleasant warmth of the April sun. An old man was sitting at the first intersection repairing an old kerosene lamp. I asked him about *Marqad-e Ghazālī* (the grave of Ghazālī). He lifted his head, looked at me in astonishment and then pointed in the direction in which I was walking. Further on, three old men were sitting on a bench as if they had been sitting there since Imam Ghazālī's time.



Three old men of Tūs, 2010. ©Al-Qalam Publishing

After about three hundred meters, a large billboard stood at the side of the alley; erected by the Archaeological Survey of Khorasan, it gave a brief description of the project to restore the ruins of Tūs. The ruins were to the left of the board and there were various wooden structures supporting the excavations, but no one was actually there working. As soon as I passed the sign, the mud wall of the ancient city became visible. The alley ended, intersecting a two-lane asphalt highway that curved around the mud wall of the ancient city and which was broken at many places, but could be seen stretching under the vast sky on a wide circular path.



Sign marking the archeological site at Tūs, 2010.
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Archeological site of ancient Tūs, 2010.
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Across the highway was a farmer's field where, about a hundred meters away from the intersection, lay a foot-high boundary wall made of unbaked bricks. I walked toward it with a strong feeling of joy: it was the grave I was seeking. There, under the vast blue Khorasan sky, in a freshly plowed field in the middle of a valley bounded by snow-covered mountains, was the resting place of Ḥujjatul Islām—an approximately 30x90 feet area enclosed by a one foot-high wall made of unbaked bricks. There was a large hole on the east side of the enclosure, as if someone had discovered a grave while digging and had then abandoned the project and the place. There must have been a mausoleum with a dome over the grave at some point, because the ground was strewn with old pieces of the small bricks used for their construction.



The grave of al-Ghazālī with snowcapped mountains in background, 2004. ©Al-Qalam Publishing



Post Script: After my first visit to the grave of Imam al-Ghazālī on April 11, 2004, I made several inquiries from knowledgeable people in Iran as well as from the Archeology Survey of Khorasan. These inquiries confirmed that the grave was discovered “a few years ago” and that there are plans to build a mausoleum over the grave. In one official response, it was said:

According to the most recent research, it has been established that the Harunieh was a khanqah built near a masjid and constructed in the seventh or eighth century Hijrah. The American missionary Dwight M. Donaldson had visited it in 1917 and had observed that this building was only the Khanqah belonging to

Imam Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī,¹ but this building is not at all related to Imam al-Ghazālī. The historical accounts and chronicles and the famous world travelers who have paid visit to the grave of Imam al-Ghazālī have recorded its location outside the precincts of the historical city of Tus (Tāberan). The author of *Miḥmān Nāmāh-i Bukhāra*, compiled in 915/1509, has described the grave of Imam al-Ghazālī in detail. He has mentioned that the grave site was very small and was located near the western rampart of Tus.² In 1995 the Archaeological Survey of Khorasan province carried out excavations in this area and discovered the remains of the grave which correspond to the description in *Miḥmān Nāmāh-i Bukhāra*.



The grave of al-Ghazālī surrounded by a low wall, 2010.

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1. For this account, see Dwight M. Donaldson, "A Visit to the Grave of al-Ghazzali," *The Muslim World* 8 (April 1918) 2: 137–140.
2. Only two manuscripts of *Miḥmān Nāmāh-i Bukhāra* of Faḍl Allāh b. Rūzbikhān Iṣfahānī (862/1457-927/1521) are known to have survived. A complete copy of the original is kept at the Nūrī 'Uthmāniya Library, Istanbul; the other, a rough incomplete autographic copy, is at the Oriental Manuscript Collection of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. Both manuscripts have been published, the former edited by Manuchihr Sutude (Tehran: Bung'h-i tarjūmah va nashr-i kit'b, 1963?) and the latter, with a partial Russian translation, edited by R. P. Djahilova (Moskow: Zapiski Buharskogo gostja, 1976).