Elements for a social History of Timurid and Safavid Quhistān: the rural sanctuaries of the region

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Abstract

The present work contributes to the reconstruction of the social and religious history of the East-Iranian region of Quhistān during the 15th and 16th centuries. The first part of the article is an overview of studies on Quhistān. The second part investigates a forgotten source of the early 16th century, the so-called Mazārnāma *of ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Yāsirī Ḥusāmī. The work of Ḥusāmī nowadays is considered lost, but thanks to the early 20th century polymath Muḥammad Ḥusayn Āyatī Bīrjandī a part of the work still survives. Āyatī acquired a manuscript of the* Mazārnāma *and used it to write a history of Quhistān. Analyzing Ḥusāmī's descriptions of the rural sanctuaries and comparing them with the coeval sources, the author sheds light on the socio-economic and religious landscape of Quhistān in late Timurid and Safavid period.*

Key words: Islamic sanctuaries, History of Iran, History of Quhistān, Turco-Iranian world, Timurid period, Safavid period

1. Quhistān: an historical and geographic view

Scholarly literature devoted little attention to the East-Iranian region of Quhistān. This is especially true for the social, economic and cultural history of the region in Pre-modern times. The limited, albeit important, scholarship on Pre-modern Quhistān stands in stark contrast with the considerable amount of Arabic and Persian sources from the early Islamic to Timurid periods describing the region as an important thoroughfare for trade. Indeed, Quhistān was located between present-day Iran and Afghanistan, connecting the South coast of the Iranian Plateau to the commercial hubs of Central Asia.

Indicatively, the region laid South of the city of Nishapur, now in Iran, West of Herat, in Afghanistan, and North of the region of Sistān (Le Strange 1905: 352-363). The Western borders were marked by the desert surrounding the city of Ṭabas. According to the medieval Arab geographers, the administrative capital of the region was Qāyin (Qā'in)

and other important urban centers were Turshīz and Gunābād to the North, Ṭabas-i Masīnā to the East, and Bīrjand located at the center of the region, nearby Qāyin. Nowadays, the toponym "Quhistān" does not appear on any map. Most of its historical territory is part of the modern administrative region of Khurāsān-i Junūbī, "Southern Khurāsān" (Iran). Nonetheless, a collective memory of this region's past endures, since the locals still call the region "Quhistān" or "Qāyināt" (*i.e.* the region around Qāyin). During the 19th and 20th centuries, the city of Bīrjand grew considerably both in economic and demographic terms, replacing Qāyin as the main center and administrative capital of the region.

Modern historical studies on Quhistān are commonly based on a few common sources. These sources, so widely cited in historical studies on Quhistān, are fragmentary and in some cases inaccurate and do not allow us to fully reconstruct the historical development and socio-cultural context of the region.

If, for instance, we look at the Arabic geographical texts composed between the 11th and 12th centuries, we find that they inform us on the main commercial routes, the names of the villages, the stages on the principal caravan routes, and provide only vague descriptions of the cities and the urban conglomerates of Quhistān. Moreover, Arab geographers follow the standard patterns of geographical narration, as they tend to force the information collected – in most of the cases obtained by third parties – into a time-honored literary canon, that of descriptive geography (Tolmacheva 1995). In other words, these authors are more interested in idealizing the territory of the Abbasid Caliphate than in describing its lands.

Despite the fact that the region was an important center of Zoroastrian revolts in the 8th century and that the early Abbasid propaganda found fertile ground in the area between the 8th and 9th centuries (Amoretti 1975: 481-519), Quhistān is more commonly associated with the Ismaili rule that interested the region between the 11th and 13th centuries. Nizari Ismaili presence in the Iranian Plateau dates back to the 11th century and covers the period from the Seljuq apogee and fall in Iran, the rising of the Turk-Iranian dynasties of the Ghūrids and Khwārazmshāhīs and continues until the Mongol invasions of the second half of the 13th century (Daftary 2005).

The 11th century is marked also by the coming of the first Turco-Iranian dynasties to rule in the Iranian Plateau. The competition between the Ghaznavid and the Qarakhanid for the control of Trasoxiana

eventually resulted in the southward migration of Oguhz nomadic tribes, headed by the clan of the Seljuqs. The Seljuqs soon afterwards conquered the entire Iranian Plateau, Anatolia, Syria. Their prosperous empire lasted more than a century and a half, until the death of the last sultan Aḥmad Sanjar in 1153.

In the first decades of the Seljuq empire, political power rested in the hands of the powerful vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (1064 -1092), a member of the local Iranian aristocracy. Niẓām al-Mulk kept the empire together thanks to the support of the ruling elites of the main urban centers, but neglected its peripheries. Outside the cities, groups of nomadic Turkmans roamed the land, raiding villages and towns. The situation provoked discontent among the population and disaffection towards the central government. Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ (1034-1124) a revolutionary Nizari Ismaili propagandist (*dāʿī*) was able to channel the discontent for his own purposes. He, in 1088, settled in the Sub-Caspian region of Rūdbār and, with the support of the local communities, established a political entity opposite to the Seljuqs. The *modus gubernandi* of Ḥasan-i Sabbāḥ, in contrast with coeval polities such as the Seljuq empire, did not consist in a unitary and centralized government. Instead, Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's rule comprised a complex network of mountain castles and fortifications dislocated all over the Iranian Plateau. The castles communicated with each other and were located in strategic positions, near the main trading routes or in the outskirts of the main cities. In some cases, they were very heavily fortified and could resist lengthy sieges (Daftary 2015: 41-57). One of the regions under the Ismaili control, was Quhistān, as the largest and the most strategic region after Rūdbār, where Ḥasan-i Ṣabbāḥ's headquarters were located.

Even for the Ismaili apogee in Quhistān, historical sources do not provide either a detailed geographical description, or a comprehensive historical narrative. This is not surprising. The primary sources that we have at our disposal were composed at Seljuq, Ghūrid and then Ilkhanid courts, and to rely exclusively on them lead to an unbalanced and in some ways distorted historical framework. These sources misrepresent the historical events, emphasizing the victories and the conquests of the central power, and they openly condemn and always cast a bad light on the Ismailis. It is therefore difficult to interpret some of the textual passages containing the chronicles of the battles against the Ismailis or the numbers of the Ismailis slaughtered by victorious armies. The emerging narrative

over-emphasizes not only the victories of the central power but also the losses of the Ismailis. There are similar issues with primary sources on the relationships between the Mongols and the Ismailis.

The coming of the Mongols in Iran dates to the second half of the 13th century. The consequences of the Mongol invasions were devastating for the entire Iranian Plateau and in particular for the region of Khurāsān. Following the first wave of invasions, the Iranian lands saw the rise of the Ilkhanid dynasty. In this period, members of the family of Genghis Khan or, in some cases, vassal dynasties shared the control of the vast territories conquered by the Mongols. The latter was the case of the Karts, a regional dynasty coming from a branch of the Ghūrids and controlling the region of Herat. Taking advantage of the disorders within the Mongol administration, the Karts gained their independence. It was between the 13th and 14th centuries that Quhistān became a peripheral area of the Kart dominions. Thus, the region entered the orbit of Herat, whose hegemony over Quhistān lasted until the end of the Timurid period.

In the second half of the 14th century, the Central Asian conqueror Timur subjugated all of Persia, laying waste to its lands and destroying many of its cities. In 1381, Timur came to Herat, conquered the city and brought the Kart dynasty to an end. During the Timurid period Herat became the capital of the empire, as the center of the economic and political activities of the successors of Timur (Subtelny 2007). Under the Timurids the city flourished with the ambitious promotion of cultural endeavours and the commission of great architectonic buildings. During the reign of Sultan Ḥusaiyn Bāyqarā Herat became a leading intellectual center, attracting some of the most celebrated intellectuals of the time, such as ʿAlī-Shīr Nawāʾī, Dawlatshāh Samarqandī, and Mīrkhwānd (Binbaş 2016). It was in a similar artistic, historical and geographical context that the intellectuals of the time began to show an increasing interest for the life and the work of the great poets and authors of the past and to collect their memories in biographical anthologies called *tadhkirāt* (sing. *tadhkira*).

This genre contains some important details concerning the geography of Quhistān. The authors of *tadhkirāt* report the biographical details of poets, and, in some cases, they describe the villages or the towns where they lived. *Tadhkirāt* were meant to remember or celebrate the memory not only of poets or intellectuals, but also of sufi masters, holy men, religious and political authorities, princes, viziers or kings. *Tadhkirāt* authors used mostly direct sources and so they convey more loyal

descriptions of the social and religious landscape than strictly historical sources.

In the case of Timurid Quhistān, it is not unusual to find biographies of illustrious figures who lived in the region. This is for example the case of the poet Nizārī Quhistānī – whose family was probably Ismaili – who lived in Bīrjand between the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries (Jamal 2002: 84-107). The poet lived in that crucial period of Iranian history that was the coming of the Mongol and the subsequent socio-economic transformation of the Iranian Plateau, with the disappearance of the Ismailis from the religious landscape. Thus, if we collect the information we can derive from the biography of the poet and compare it with notices found in his verses, we can try to reconstruct the surrounding historical context. The same could be done with the biographies of other poets, sufi, illustrious figures or princes. Every *tadhkira* contains important clues and indications which, if correctly decrypted and interpreted in an adequate methodological framework, allow us to finally break new ground in the historical studies on Quhistān.

2. Āyatī Bīrjandī's history of Quhistān

In the following pages, we are going to investigate a modern biographical anthology compiled in 1958 by an Iranian polymath native of Bīrjand named Muḥammad Ḥusayn Āyatī Bīrjandī. The author wrote an opus entitled *Bahāristān dar tārīkh wa tarājim-i rijāl-i Qāʾināt u Quhistān* in which he collected the biographies of illustrious personalities, who were born or lived in Quhistān from the early Islamic period to his days. Āyatī Bīrjandī divided his work into three sections: in the first one, he narrates the history of Quhistān from the venture of Islam to modernity. In the second part, Āyatī describes the *mazārāt,* i.e. the sanctuaries of the region, and the pilgrimage sites. In the third and last part, he reports the biographies of illustrious men of Quhistān.

The peculiarity of this work lies in the sources that the author used for the second and the third part of the book. Āyatī affirms that he used a work, whose original title is unknown, composed between the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th centuries by a certain ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Yāsirī Ḥusāmī native of Quhistān (Āyātī 1958; Aubin 1967). This work is ignored by modern scholarship. It has never been edited and nowadays it is believed to be lost. Āyatī affirms that he could acquire a copy of a

manuscript of this work and that he used all the information it contained for the compilation of his *Bahāristān.* Indeed, the information reported are very precise and, for what concerns us here, useful for the reconstruction of the social and religious landscape of Quhistān during the Timurid and Safavid periods.

If ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Yāsirī Ḥusāmī's work is nowadays lost, there is also very little information on the author. The historian Jean Aubin wrote in an article published in 1967, quoting from Timurid and Safavid sources, that Ḥusāmī was a disciple of the poet Ibn Ḥusām Khūsfī, the author of the epic *Khāwarānnāma* composed in 1426-27 (Aubin 1967: 188; Rubanovich 2017). The two were intimately acquainted: according to ʿAlī-Shīr Navāʾī, it was Ibn Ḥusām Khūsfī who gave Ḥusāmī his *nom de plume* (*apud* Aubin 1967: 188 *n. 1*). In terms of religious affiliation and beliefs, biographical works describe Ḥusāmī as a Shia extremist. On this, the sufi poet of Herat Fakhrī Harawī (1497-1566) in his work *Laṭāʾifnāma* reports an anecdote on Ḥusāmī. It is reported that Ḥusāmī had an argument with the Sunni *ʿulamāʾ* at the court of Herat and he was accused of extremism and ridiculed in front of the prince (*apud* Aubin 1967: 188). Be it as it may, in the 19th century only few sections of the original work of Ḥusāmī had survived, but they were discovered by a certain Sayyid ʿAbdullāh Mujtahid, who produced few copies of it. One of them came into the hands of the aforementioned Muḥammad Ḥusayn Āyatī, who, in 1958, used that materials to write a history of Quhistān (Āyatī 1327/1958: 260-261). According to Āyatī, the central part of the original text, containing the description of the sanctuaries of the region had survived. This is why Sayyid ʿAbdullāh Mujtahid, the discoverer of the work, titled it *Mazārnāma* (Āyatī 1327/1958: 260-261). Āyatī, quoting from Ḥusāmī, affirms that to compile his work Ḥusāmī used an opus titled *Tārīkh-i Quhistān* (History of Quhistān) – now lost – composed by a certain Rūbakhtī plausibly in the 14th or 15th centuries. This *Tārīkh-i Quhistān* is quoted by another author, the Nizari Ismaili Khayrkhwāh Harātī (m. 1553). The association between Ismaili authors and Quhistān led the renowned orientalist Vladimir Iwanov to assume that the authorship of the *Tārīkh-i Quhistān* was actually of the Ismaili Bū Isḥāq Quhistānī, who was native of Quhistān (Virani 2007: 126).

However, at the present state of the art, it is impossible to trace back the authorship of the opus. The work of Ḥusāmī, here cited through Āyatī, is a very interesting case of textual transmission and it deserves

some attention. In other words, we are dealing with the only existent source which openly quotes from the *Tārīkh-i Quhistān*.

3. The Timurid and Safavid sanctuaries

Before introducing the Quhistāni sanctuaries of the 15th and 16th centuries, we need first to make some clarifications about the terms we will be using. With the word sanctuary, we translate the Persian *mazār* which usually indicates a pilgrimage site containing the tomb of a saint (*walī*) or the place where important religious figures like the Imāms or his descendants are buried. In this latter case, *i.e.* sanctuaries dedicated to the sons, grandsons or direct descendants of the Imāms, in modern Persian it is commonly used the term *Imāmzāda*, literally "the progeny of the Imām". In Ayati/Ḥusāmī the term *Imāmzāda* does not occur. The author reports only the term *mazār,* that we translated as "sanctuary". *Mazār* is a loan-word from Arabic, referring to the verb *zāra* "to visit" and literally means "visiting place". These sanctuaries usually are domed buildings of variable size. Some of them only have a small room containing the tomb, while others, thanks to pilgrims donations, can reach a considerable size, and they can include within their perimeter mosques, prayer rooms and even living areas.

In his *Mazārnāma*, Ḥusāmī describes the sanctuaries and adds some important historical information quoting explicitly from the *Tārīkh-i Quhistān*. The value of Ḥusāmī's work consists in the important clues it contains, which are an invaluable source for the reconstruction of the social and religious history of the rural region of Quhistān.

1. The first sanctuary described by Ḥusāmī is that of Shāhrakht dedicated to Saʿadullāh, the son the 7th Shia Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim and successor of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. Shāhrakht is a village in central Quhistān, located in the district of Zīrkūh, at South-East of Bīrjand. The sanctuary is situated on the slopes of a mountain nearby the village. The sanctuary dates to the 15th century and it was constructed following the mystical appearance of a local holy man who revealed the exact position of the burial of Saʿadullāh. In that place, it was built a sanctuary (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 161).

2. The second sanctuary described is that dedicated to Zaynab, daughter of the Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim. The sanctuary is located in the rural district

of Kāhin at Nahārjān, in the outskirts of Bīrjand. Ḥusāmī affirms that it was erected at the center of a *mazraʿa* (*i.e.* an agricultural field) at the dependencies of the village of Kāhin (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 148-149).

3. In the work of Ḥusāmī it is reported that in the *mazraʿa* of Ḥanbal, nearby the village of Fashārūd at the dependencies of Bīrjand, there was a sanctuary which contained the tomb of Sulṭān Ibrāhīm, another descendant of the Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim. It is reported that Sulṭān Ibrāhīm, passing through Quhistān, died of poisoning and he was buried in the middle of a *mazraʿa*. Later the people of Fashārūd erected a sanctuary in his honor. Āyatī adds a popular legend linked to the place which he collected. A treasury agent from the court of the king came to the sanctuary and ventured to affirm that it was untrue and unworthy of devotion. After this declaration, the fiscal agent was seized by terrible pains in his stomach and throughout the body. After few hours, right inside that sanctuary, the officer died in pain (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 156-157).

4. Another sanctuary described is that of the three *sādāt* (sing. *sayyid*), descendants of the Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim. At the time of the persecution of the Umayyad Caliphate, the three fled out of Baghdad and they hid in the desert and mountains of the Iranian Plateau. After much wandering, they reached the district of Zīrkūh. The three spent some days at Chahār Gunbad nearby Afīn and from there they hid in the mount *Āskūh* and the mount *Fūrāb* where they perished. Their bodies were taken to the village of Afīn where the sanctuary was erected (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 161).

5. Ḥusāmī moves on to describe the sanctuary of Ḥāmidallāh ʿAlawī located in the village of Chinisht to the east of Bīrjand in the district of Nahārjān. The author reports a very interesting tradition linked to its foundation. Ḥāmidallāh ʿAlawī was the son of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, the 5th Shia Imām who lived between the 7th and the 8th century. According to the tradition, the bodies of Ḥāmidallāh ʿAlawī and his sons Nābil, Qāsim and Jālīl were thrown in a cave in the outskirts of Chinisht and left there. It was only centuries later that Muḥammad Mushaʿshaʿ found out the bodies. Muḥammad Mushaʿshaʿ, known also as Muḥammad b. Falāḥ (1400-1461), was a propagandist and the founder of a religious movement called *mushaʿshaʿiyya*, originated in the province of Khūzistān and then spread all over the Middle East. Once he arrived in Quhistān, Muḥammad Mushaʿshaʿ found the cave with the

bodies and there he built a sanctuary which attracted pilgrims from the entire region. The poet Ibn Ḥusām Khūsfī also visited and described this sanctuary (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 151-153).

6. The sanctuary of Sayyid Naqīb in the *mazraʿa* of Bushd, the sanctuary of Kūh-i Bāqirān and the sanctuary of Shaykhan (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 153-155). Āyatī/Ḥusāmī describe this group of sanctuaries only briefly. These three sanctuaries are built a few hundred meters from each other and were all erected on the tombs of the descendants of the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 151-153).

7. The sanctuary of Naṣrābād in Khūsf. Ḥusāmī tells that during the Timurid period a group of *ʿulamāʾ* of Quhistān, following an oneiric apparition, travelled to the village of Naṣrābād in the outskirts of the town of Khūsf in northern Quhistān. In that town, there was a tree around which the pilgrims circumambulated since it was believed to have healing powers. In response to the oneiric apparition, the *ʿulamāʾ* ordered to dig under the tree. Among the roots, the diggers found the body of one of the sons of the Imām Musā al-Kāẓim, named Abū al-Qāsim. The body was still in good conditions and the head was bloodied. Thus, it was ordered to the people of the town to build a sanctuary and to plant a holy tree on the tomb. (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 157-158).

4. Conclusions: the sanctuaries and the rural setting

The description by Ḥusāmī/Āyatī of the geography of the sanctuaries is highly informative. These sanctuaries are placed in extremely rural contexts, in small villages, and towns. The sanctuaries described by Ḥusāmī lies, with no exception, outside urban contexts. With proper evaluation, the information this author conveys can shed light on the social, religious and economic history of rural Quhistān.

First of all, we need to make some observation on the term *mazraʿa* and its usage in our source. The meaning of the term is not immediate. Even though it literally means "agricultural or cultivated field", it refers to very small agricultural villages or small farms surrounded by fields. The fact that in the sources the sanctuaries are strongly linked to the *mazraʿa*, it means that religiosity in Quhistān was strictly related to the rural sphere and agricultural production. In the Timurid and Safavid sources, the *mazraʿa*s are described as small

agricultural centers at the dependencies of the villages that were occupied by the farmers only seasonally. They could generally house thirty or forty people, and were normally occupied during the harvest season and abandoned during the unproductive months of the year (Lambton 1953: 4). The sources report that in Quhistān there was an incredibly high number of these *mazraʿas*, located in peripheral areas, far from urban centers. This is for example the case of the city of Jām in Northern Quhistān. Ḥāfiẓ-i Abrū, the renowned Timurid historian and geographer, reports that there were two hundred *mazraʿa*s at the dependencies of the town (Krawulsky 1984: 36). There were twenty villages and fifty *mazraʿa*s at the dependencies of the city of Gunābād. In Bīrjand there were three villages and thirty-five *mazraʿa*s and on the outskirt of the town of Shāhkhin, in central Quhistān, there were seven village and one hundred *mazraʿa*s (Krawulsky 1984: 36-40). It follows that the *mazraʿa*s played a key role in the socio-economic life of the entire region.

Another historian from the Timurid period, Būzjānī, in his work *Rawḍat al-riyāḥīn* reports more interesting data on the relationship of the *mazraʿa*s with popular religiosity. Būzjānī reports that a holy man revered in Jām used to spend a period of complete isolation at his own *mazraʿa* outside the city with the purpose to retire to private life and meditate (Būzjānī 1345/1966: 127). The same did another holy man named Darwīsh Tāzyānī, owner of *mazraʿa*s, and discussed also by Ḥusāmī (Āyatī/Ḥusāmī 1327/1958: 282).

The data reported by the sources confirm that the *mazraʿa* were strictly connected with the religious practices of the rural inhabitants of Quhistān. Moreover, these reports date back to the late Timurid and the early Safavid periods, which means before the policies of "Shia conversion" promoted by the Safavid dynasty throughout the empire. Nevertheless, a strong *alidism* and the veneration for the Shia Imām was particularly widespread in the rural areas of the region. In fact, as reported by Ḥusāmī/Āyatī, almost each and every sanctuary was dedicated to the descendants of the 7th Shia Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim. This is not particularly surprising, considering that the *Musawī Cicyle* – i.e. the veneration for the Imām Mūsā – was widespread in Iran during the Timurid and early Safavid periods. In fact, there were numerous *musawī* Imāmzādas also in Kermān and Fārs (Aubin 1956: 8).

In addition to the *Musawī Cicyle,* it is attested in Ḥusāmī the presence of the *Bāqirī Cicyle*, namely the veneration for the Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir and his descendant persecuted by the Umayyad

Caliphs Ḥusāmī/Āyatī reports the story of how the still recognizable corpses of the three *sādāt* were found in a cave. The same account is reported by the biographer Amīn Aḥmad Rāzī in his anthology *Tadhkira-yi haft iqlīm*. Rāzī, among the peculiarities of Quhistān, counts the presence of a sanctuary reverend by the inhabitants of the region. Rāzī gives us another detail. The corpses were not only well recognizable and not disfigured by time, but they looked as if they were simply asleep (Amīn Aḥmad Rāzī 1378/1999: Vol. 2, 864-865). This story is reminiscent of the famous legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. Seven young men in order to escape the Roman persecution, hid in a cave in the mountain and felt asleep. After three hundred years, they were found by a local landowner and finally woke up. Their bodies were untouched by time. Even though a direct comparison with the legend would result unproductive, it is, however, important to note the presence of archetypes and tropes of popular legends that were still circulating among a vast territory from Anatolia to the Eastern borders of the Persianate world at the beginning of the modern era (Scarcia 2018). Some of these legends were linked to the figures of the *Ahl al-bayt* and the Imāms. One telling example is the work composed by the "rural poet" of Quhistān Ibn Ḥusām Khūsfī, the mentor of Husāmī. Ibn Ḥusām Khūsfī wrote an epic poem entitled *Khāwarānnāma* in which he recounts the deeds of Imām ʿAlī depicted as a mythical hero.

In this article, we showed how previously overlooked sources can reveal clues that help us in the reconstruction of the socio-religious and economic landscape of Quhistān. The sanctuary descriptions presented here are evidence of a connection between rural forms of religiosity and the *mazraʿa*s. During the Timurid and early Safavid periods, Quhistān was predominantly a rural and agricultural region at the peripheries of empires. Local farmers moved seasonally from their villages to the *mazraʿa*s. Labor force was concentrated predominantly outside the urban areas. It was there that a form of popular pro-Shia religiosity connected to the Imāms took hold. Sanctuaries were erected in the *mazraʿa*s and the legends connected to their foundation appear to be linked with local popular traditions. The *mazraʿa*s were also perceived as places of isolation, far from the turmoil of the cities and they were chosen by the holy men as spiritual retreats. Moreover, these places of retreat and pro-Shia religiosity drew opposition from the central power, well represented by the story of treasury agent who questioned the truthfulness of one of the sanctuaries. This suggests

that such places played a role in terms of local – *i.e.* rural – resistance and opposition to the ruling class and the urban elites. It was for clear political reasons that the propagandist Muḥammad Mushaʿshaʿ looked at the *mazraʿa*s of the region as centers to spread his doctrine.

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