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# THE MAQAMAT AS PLACES OF POPULAR PRACTICES: EVOLUTION AND DIVERSITY

Case studies from Hebron and its region

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**Synthesis**

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## About the EU Funded Project “My Heritage! My Identity!”

In 2018, the European Union provided a grant to fund a project titled, “My Heritage! My Identity!”<sup>1</sup> in Palestine. The project is being jointly implemented by four partners: AFRAT - France ([www.afrat.com](http://www.afrat.com)), Bethlehem University / Institute for Community Partnership - Palestine ([www.bethlehem.edu](http://www.bethlehem.edu)), Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between People - Palestine ([www.pcr.ps](http://www.pcr.ps)) and TÉTRAKTYS - France ([www.tetraktys-association.org](http://www.tetraktys-association.org)).

It aims to contribute to preserving and promoting cultural heritage located along the community-based walking Masār Ibrāhīm (trail) in Palestine, in an effort to enhance Palestinian citizenship and identity.

What’s more, the project offers activities that will contribute to the cohesiveness of the Palestinian people. It promotes inclusion and trust and aims to create a sense of belonging in order to positively influence relations among the diverse groups in Palestinian society.

For more information on the project, please visit the project website at the following link: [www.myheritage.ps](http://www.myheritage.ps) and the Facebook page at: [www.facebook.com/myheritagemyidentity](https://www.facebook.com/myheritagemyidentity)

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<sup>1</sup> The original title of the EU project was “Promoting Governance and Citizenship in Palestine”. EU project reference: ENI/2017/390-692.

## About the research process

The present research project has been developed within the framework of the EU funded project “My Heritage! My Identity!”.

The four project partners collaborated with academic experts from Palestine and France to identify six topics related to Palestinian cultural heritage. A scientific committee was established at the beginning of 2018 to select relevant topics.

The scientific committee is composed of the following scholars:

### Palestinian researchers :



**Omar Abed Rabo**  
Research fellow and lecturer of History & archaeology at Bethlehem University



**Nazmi Amin Jubeh**  
Department of History and Archaeology, Birzeit University. Expert of Cultural Heritage

**Jamil Khader, Ph.D.**  
Dean of Research at Bethlehem University

**Zahraa Zawawi**  
Assistant Professor at An-Najah National University, Head, Urban Planning Engineering Department

**Wael Hamareh**  
Scientific Committee Director – MOTA

### French researchers:



**Manoël Pénicaud**  
Research fellow and lecturer of Anthropology (Institute of mediterranean, european and comparative ethnology)



**NajlaNakhlé- Cerruti**  
Research fellow in Arts &Litterature (French Institute for the Near East)



**Pauline Bosredon**  
Research fellow and lecturer of Geography & Urban planning (Lille University)



**Kevin Trehuedic**  
Research fellow and lecturer of History & Archaeology (Paris Est-Créteil University)



**Jacques Barou**  
Research fellow and lecturer in Ethnology & sociology (Political Sciences Institute of Grenoble)

The scientific committee identified six topics, five of which were selected for completion:

- The maqāmāt as a place of popular practices: evolution and diversity
- From terraces to settlements: the testimony of Masār Ibrāhīm landscapes
- “The one who has olive oil will never be poor”. Material and political aspects of a Palestinian symbol.
- Architecture and ways of living: traditional and modern Palestinian villages and cities
- Ḥikāyāt Palestine through the Masār Ibrāhīm: dialects, oral memories and histories

Furthermore, the members of the committee have been involved throughout the research process to support the researchers.

Finally, three Palestinian members of the committee, Dr. Al Jubeh, Dr. Abed Rabo and Dr. Khader, were in charge of the final proof reading and copy editing of the research projects.

To discover the five researches, please visit the project website: [www.myheritage.ps](http://www.myheritage.ps)<sup>2</sup>

## About the Author

Marion Lecoquierre is a French geographer currently teaching at the Aix-Marseille University, France. She has been conducting research in Palestine and Israel since 2011. She holds a PhD degree in Political and Social science from the European University Institute (Florence). Her thesis, entitled “Holding on to place, spatialities of resistance in Israel and Palestine” looks at the spatial dimension of local struggles, scrutinizing practices and representations of contention in Jerusalem, Hebron and al-Araqib. She has since then been awarded several postdoctoral grants by the French Research Center in Jerusalem (CRFJ), the French Institute in the Near East (IFPO) and the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’homme (FMSH). Her recent research projects concentrate on two broad themes, religious territorialities and the geopolitics of cities.

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<sup>2</sup> To quote this report: Lecoquierre M., 2019. “The maqāmāt as places of popular practice: evolution and diversity”, EU funded project “My Heritage! My Identity!” (ENI/2017/390-692), available at: [www.myheritage.ps](http://www.myheritage.ps)

## Synthesis

Studying the *maqāmāt* (plural of “*maqām*”), the tombs or shrines of saints, prophets or other religious figures, in Palestine represents an interesting approach to study the society. This approach indeed tackles different but closely related dimensions, including not only the history and collective memory, religion, and culture, but also space and its material, symbolical and spiritual meaning.

The *maqāmāt* are sacred sites, often made of a single sacred chamber whitewashed and domed, built around a cenotaph, a symbolic structure that can be made of marble or cement, and represents a tomb or a saintly presence. The term *maqām* can designate the building, but also the room with the cenotaph or even the cenotaph itself. If most of the *maqāmāt* studied here are those of “*anbiya*” (prophets), who have a major religious importance, they can also celebrate “*awliya*”, saintly men of lesser importance and whose identity can be unknown. If many *maqāmāt* shelter tombs, it is not the rule. The term “*maqām*” comes from the verb “*qama*” which means standing: a *maqām* is thus the place where someone stood, where they lived or passed at one moment.

The *maqāmāt* have been an intrinsic part of the landscape and of the cultural life in Palestine for a long time, as shown by Tawfik Canaan in his 1927 book *Mohammedan saints and sanctuaries in Palestine*. Their place in Palestinian culture has, however, changed: if they retain a strong religious and spiritual meaning, with the figures represented by these *maqāmāt* still revered, a lot of the practices and rituals traditionally connected to their presence are largely disappearing.

The main *maqāmāt* considered here are located in the southern West Bank. We will consider especially the Cave of Patriarchs in Hebron, but also three *maqāmāt* situated in Bani Na'im (Lut, Yaqin and Fatima); Halhul, where the Nabi Yunis shrine shelters the cenotaph of Prophet Jonas; Dura (*maqām* of Nabi Nuh); and al-Tabaqa (*maqām* of Sheikh Mohammad al-'Abed). These *maqāmāt* cover a wide range of figures, from Patriarchs and Prophets to local *awliya*, and a variety of places, from a holy city to a village shrine. As such, they represent many of the various types of *maqāmāt* that can be found in the West Bank, and of the different practices that are related to them. This report centres largely on Muslim places and practices as Islam is the main religion in the West Bank and the majority of the believers frequenting those shrines are

Muslims. Jewish practices were also considered, mostly with regards to the Cave of Patriarchs in Hebron, and Rachel's Tomb next to Bethlehem. Christian practices are mentioned chiefly regarding the Russian Orthodox Church in Hebron and the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem.

This research, concentrating on the evolution of the maqāmāt in Palestine, has a central diachronic dimension. Juxtaposing past and present through texts, pictures and testimonies, I will underline the transformations as well as the permanence taking place in those sites in terms of architecture, practices, representations, rituals, etc. First, through a presentation of the different places taken as case studies, I will show the different narratives that surround those places and their contradictions and points of convergence. I will then sum up the various practices observed or evoked in the texts and on the ground, moving on in a third part to the main elements that can explain the most recent evolutions of practices and discourses around the maqāmāt. Finally, I will tackle the topic of intangible heritage: apart from the traditions connected to the maqāmāt, two other points stand out namely, the importance of Palestine as the Holy Land and the figure of Abraham.

## **1. The maqāmāt between past and present: converging and conflicting narratives**

The maqāmāt have been the object of numerous discourses by medieval travellers, orientalist eager to find the places mentioned in the holy scriptures, scholars, etc. These sources, complemented by contemporary discourses, show the contradictions and convergences existing within the narratives about those sites.

The most important site considered in this report is the Cave of the Patriarchs (Haram al-Ibrahimi in Arabic, Me'arat haMachpelah in Hebrew), the religious core of Hebron. It is the second sacred site in the region after Jerusalem for both Muslims and Jews and is central as the burial place of Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) and six other important biblical figures. The building contains the maqāmāt of Abraham and Sara, Isaac, Rebecca, Leah and Jacob. The last one is contested – and often forgotten. In the Muslim tradition it is considered the burial place of Joseph (Yusuf), whereas the Jewish tradition presents it as that of Esau, brother of Jacob, who is not considered a Patriarch. The actual tombs of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are believed to be in a double cave located under the Haram.

The mosque has been separated in two sections, Muslim and Jewish, since 1994, with the division process starting as early as 1967 after the Six-Days War and the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and Gaza. A sacred place disputed for centuries, the religious traditions and narratives around the place can be very divergent, despite their common basis. A hollow rock located next to the maqām of Abraham is, for example, considered by Muslims as the imprint of the Prophet, left on his nightly journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, whereas the Jewish tradition affirms it is the imprint of Adam’s heel, left when he fell on earth after being cast out of the Garden of Eden. This resonates with another narrative in Judaism that places the tomb of Adam and Eve there, as well as the entrance to the Garden of Eden. Two other places, which are also connected to the figure of Abraham, have to be taken into account in this sacred geography of Hebron: the tree of Mamre, or Abraham’s oak, where Abraham is believed to have welcomed the three angels sent by God as his guests, located within the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Ibrahimi soup-kitchen, next to the Haram, which has been feeding the poor for centuries, upholding the spirit of hospitality displayed by Abraham.

Bani Na’im, located few kilometres east of Hebron, deserves to be better known in terms of historical and religious heritage. The city counts three maqāmāt: Maqām Yaqin, Maqām Fatima and Maqām Lut. All three are mentioned in very ancient texts and are surrounded by interesting and contradictory traditions.

The area is also connected to Abraham, through his nephew Lut, a prophet who lived in Sodom before God destroyed the sinful city. Maqām Yaqin, sometimes presented in old texts as the tomb of Cain, owes his name to that very episode: “Yaqin” comes from “*tayaqqana*” which means “to know for sure”. The maqām thus celebrates a moment of realization, when Abraham and Lut, seeing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, realized that God is powerful and keeps his promises. Old texts call this place the “Mosque of conviction” or the “Mosque of truth”. Maqām Fatima, situated next to Maqām Yaqin, is also locally called Maqām Banat al-Hassan w al-Hussein (Shrine of Hassan and Hussein’s daughters), or Banat Hussein (daughters of Hussein). References to old texts such as Mujir ed-Din and Ibn Battuta show the same confusion around its name - Fatima is presented as the daughter of Hasan or Hussein, both of them sons of Ali and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. The inscriptions located in the maqām reported by Ibn Battuta, however, seems to indicate that the shrine is dedicated to Fatima, daughter of Hussein. According to residents of the village, until 1967 Shi’a were coming on pilgrimage to the shrine because of its connection to the family of Ali.

The third holy place and maqām in Bani Na'im is the Maqām of Lut (Maqām an-Nabi Lut) situated within the mosque dedicated to the prophet (Masjid Lut). The cenotaph marks the place where he was supposedly buried. A tradition connects the mosque to the Haram al-Ibrahimi through a tunnel that was closed.

The maqām of Nabi Yunis (Prophet Jonas) in Halhul (north of Hebron) used to be a landmark in the region, because of its very distinctive stone architecture. The mosque has today a modern and undistinctive appearance as an extension was built around the old structure. Here, too, different narratives and interpretations can be found: often presented as the tomb of Jonas, both in ancient and contemporary literature, the imam of the mosque explained that it is the place where Jonas lived for one year after being thrown out of the whale in Jaffa. This could be one enduring explanation or a modern rationalization of the fact that another tomb is known for Jonas, in Niniveh (Iraq, currently Mosul).

The presence of Nabi Nuh (shrine of Prophet Noah) in Dura is generally explained through a story of how the Ottomans arrived with a map and claimed that the tomb of Noah was there. They explored the area, found a cave blocked with some stones and built the shrine above it. The clear doubts expressed by people about the veracity of this story is balanced by the Islamic tradition that a Prophet must be buried where he dies, without being brought back to his country of origin.

Finally, the maqām of sheikh Mohammad al-'Abed, in al-Tabaqa, is a traditional countryside maqām, with a unique room that contains a mihrab and was covered with a dome (now destroyed) and several trees planted nearby. A low entry in one of the walls leads to the cave, below ground, where the tomb was probably situated, but the destruction-there makes it difficult to see.

This juxtaposition of different narratives from past and present reveals contradictions as well as meeting points in the traditions surrounding those places. It shows a continuous movement around the maqāmāt, with changing discourses and interpretations around their names, origins, religious "identity" or legitimacy. It also highlights the material and social evolution of those places, since some architectural features have survived through centuries, while many other have been destroyed. Similarly, it appears that some maqāmāt are still being visited, while other are deserted.

## 2. Permanence and change: practices in and around the maqāmāt

In terms of practices, the elements presented above, as well as the observations and interviews conducted in the field, highlight some important elements: modes of prayer, the use of candles, and placing written notes or tying pieces of cloth at the sacred places, acts connected with magic or superstitious belief... While some practices and rituals have disappeared, others are maintained under a similar form, or are renewed with slight changes, indicating evolving relationships to the sacred. A quick typology of those practices can be presented here in terms of their private or collective nature.

### 2.1. *Private practices*

Prayer, the first practice to be considered, is widespread and shared by the different monotheistic religions, albeit in different forms. Many maqāmāt are mosques and thus host the regular and collective Muslim *salat*. Personal prayers are also performed there: no specific prayers are designated for the maqāmāt in Muslim practices as prayer to intermediaries (saints, prophets...) is considered to be *haram*. Making “*nidhr*”, a vow or a promise to God is, however, allowed. People usually recite the Fatiha - the beginning chapter of the Quran - and in Hebron, according to a guard of the mosque, the Salat al-Ibrahimiyyah (Abraham’s prayer).

Direct prayers to intermediaries are part of the Jewish rituals and as such are largely performed in front of the maqāmāt within the Haram al-Ibrahimi and at the location of the “seventh step”, where Jewish believers were confined for centuries when non-Muslims were forbidden to enter the mosque. This place of prayer became part of the tradition, and the continuity of this practice is presented as a sign of respect for the suffering of past generations. It can also be explained by the localization of the steps, close to a hole that connects the outside world to the Cave under the Haram, where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are supposedly buried, which allows the believers to be closer to the true holy place. Vicinity, and even contact, are important: many Jewish worshippers grasp the windows and touch the walls, in an effort to be closer to the holy presence.

Some material elements can support or complete the prayer, incarnate the *nidhr*, the devotion, and the supplication, or leave a trace of one’s passage in the holy place. Three main physical

manifestations of devotion, particular practices associated with prayers, were detected in the field: the use of notes, candles, and pieces of cloth tied in the sacred space.

Prayers written on pieces of papers were found mainly on the Jewish side. The practice of putting notes in the cracks of the wall at the “7<sup>th</sup> step” recalls that of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. As for the Muslims, it was mentioned as an old practice, where the notes were used as talismans against the evil eye. Candles play an important role for Muslims as well as Jews and were traditionally exclusively made of olive oil. In Islam, candles are often associated with *nidhr*: in al-Tabaqa, an old woman recalled going to the maqāmāt on Fridays with candles for this purpose. Candles were clearly lit in the cave of maqām Fatima and are often found at the Seventh step.

One very interesting practice observed in the Fatima shrine is the pieces of clothes tied to the window, clearly there for some time. These rags traditionally signal a visit or are a reminder of a wish or a vow. One inhabitant of Bani Na'im explained how when he was a kid the window was completely hidden by those rags: they used to cut a piece of their clothes and to tie it saying the Fatiha and “asking for the baraka”. Finally, a last element is the belief in magic surrounding those places. In al-Tabaqa, the residents had many stories about djinns guarding the maqām and the *weli* appearing at night.

Practices thus have local variations, with particular rituals according to the place and the figure represented by the maqām. If the maqāmāt remain important for the people, it appears that these kinds of private practices have largely disappeared over the last decades. An interesting element that appears is also the central role of women, mentioned as those upholding those practices, often connected to concerns for health and fertility.

## **2.2. Collective practices and moments**

Beyond those practices, largely private and intimate, there are moments of collective rituals. Besides the general holidays (Ramadan, the Aid, Sukkot, etc.), some celebrations have a particular connection to the maqāmāt. In Hebron, for example, the Haram is exclusively open for Jews or Muslims ten days each year, for the main holidays.

On the Jewish side, many celebrations such as weddings, take place in the Haram. One holiday has a special relevance: “Chayei Sara”, the “life of Sara”, the Saturday, usually in November, when the episode of the purchase of the Cave of Patriarchs by Abraham is read in synagogue. Another holiday is celebrated at the Russian Orthodox Church: “Eid al Balluta”, the day of the Oak, also called “Eid ‘Ain Sara”, is celebrated on May 27<sup>th</sup> each year. In Bani Na’im, a ritual connected to Fatima was mentioned: according to residents, in some dry seasons people were performing sacrifices and calling upon Fatima “mother of rain, [to] give us rain”.

Pilgrimages are central collective practices. The traditional type of collective celebrations in Muslim maqāmāt were “*mawasim*”, or seasonal festivals. The most famous of these *mawasim* is that of Nabi Mousa, but this type of practice has disappeared over the years, even though some *mawasim* have been revived with a nationalistic purpose.

In the Hebron region, international pilgrimages are mostly directed to Hebron, even if the other maqāmāt are also visited. Muslim pilgrims from Indonesia, Turkey, Singapore, South Africa, Malaysia or England visit the Haram, sometimes as an “extension” to the “umrah” packages (the pilgrimage to Mecca made during the year). Many of those groups arrive on a bus, visit the Haram and leave, with very little economic revenue for the city.

### **3. Analyzing permanence and change: education, orthodoxy and occupation**

This overview of the past and present practices in and around the maqāmāt shows that many changes have taken place in terms of rituals and narratives over the last decades, a fact illustrated by a clear generational gap in the way the maqāmāt are considered. If the older generations preserve the memories of some traditions linked to the shrines, many practices are now considered as part of the folklore or as superstitions, linked to a different time and type of society, marked by widespread ignorance when it came to Islam.

Many reasons can be invoked to explain these changes, linked to the general transformation of the Palestinian society: a generalized urbanization, the failure of the Arab nationalist project, the Israel occupation, an increasingly neoliberal economy, etc. This report focuses on three reasons, found to be particularly important on the ground or directly mentioned as such by the different actors interviewed. In the various places visited, the generational gap mentioned above

was largely attributed to the sharp increase, quantitatively and qualitatively, of access to education in Palestine, which gave way to more educated people. The generalization of schooling has indeed deeply transformed the Palestinian society over the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reach a very high level of literacy.

However, a religious shift in terms of the accepted Islamic norms and doctrine also has to be underlined as a major explanation for this evolution. The type of Islam practiced and taught in Palestine has indeed changed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, towards a more rigorist and dogmatic form, due to historical events and trends, new actors, foreign interventions, etc. The current practices indeed tend towards what is seen as a “purer” or more refined conception of Islam, more in keeping with its original spirit and commandments. This can be linked to the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah, a Muslim theologian from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, who strongly condemned visits to tombs and intermediaries between the faithful and God. His vision of Islam, although controversial, became quite influential, inspiring various modern and contemporary Muslim movements such as Wahabbism.

Another dimension to take into account is of course the impact of the Israeli occupation: the Israeli military’s control over the West Bank strongly impacts the daily life of Palestinians. Restrictions on access and movement transformed their relationships to their environment. The Israeli presence in the old city of Hebron has a clear impact on the frequentation of the Haram, for example: because of the presence of the army and of radical settlers, of the atmosphere and the bad reputation of the neighborhood, many Hebronites do not go anymore to that part of the city. The young generations have always known the city to be divided and many are not aware of the situation there and never set foot in the area. The access to Maqām Yaqin was also limited by the installation of a military observation point next to the maqām and a direct order preventing it between 2001 and 2015.

#### 4. Intangible heritage

According to UNESCO, intangible heritage encompasses “*traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, (...)*”<sup>3</sup>. All the elements listed above show how the

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<sup>3</sup> “What is intangible heritage”, UNESCO, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

maqāmāt are part of the tangible but also of the intangible heritage of Palestine, through their enduring materiality but also their importance to Palestinian society, in relation to specific practices and oral traditions.

Two other points connected to the maqāmāt deserve to be acknowledged in terms of intangible heritage. First, the traditions linked to Palestine as “al-Ard al-Muqaddasa”, the Holy Land, and the land where “all Prophets have passed”, which is often mentioned on the ground to explain the number and importance of the Palestinian maqāmāt.

Second, very strong traditions concerning Abraham are perpetuated: particularly important in Hebron, these representations are shared also outside of the city. If Abraham is central in the Muslim discourse as “the father of prophets” and “the father of religions”, he is also central to the Hebronite identity and discourse as “*al-Khaleel al-Rahman*”, “the friend of God”, who gave the city its Arabic name, al-Khaleel. Also called “*Abu Dh’ifan*”, the “father of guests”, Abraham embodies a model of hospitality, after the example he set by welcoming the three angels sent by God disguised as men, receiving them in his tent and offering them food. The project proposing Hebron as a UNESCO World Heritage Site insisted on a traditional “multi-culturalism” of the city, where different communities drew “*inspiration from the same traditions and values, especially those of the prophet Ibrahim/Abraham [...] considered the paradigm of hospitality and generosity*” (Nomination Document, 2017: 66). This episode still marks the identity of the city, designated as “*balad dh’ifan*”, “the city that welcomes guests”. A common saying in Hebron is that it is “the city where nobody is hungry”, or “where nobody falls asleep hungry”. One institution perpetuates this tradition: the “Ibrahimi takiyyeh”, or “Abraham soup-kitchen”, an 800-year-old soup kitchen providing food for the poor – or anyone who presents itself.

## CONCLUSION

This report highlights the evolution the maqāmāt underwent over time in the Palestinian representations and practices. It associates the rich literature that exists on the topic, covering old texts and pictures, academic studies, etc. to concrete data and elements gathered during the fieldwork, that seem new or relevant for increasing the knowledge about the places studied and the necessary reflection about Palestinian heritage and its protection.

It shows how, despite changes, the maqāmāt remain an “enduring reality”<sup>4</sup>. The collective memory seems, however, more attached to the cultural and material dimensions of those sacred places, to the figures they represent and their religious or historical meaning, rather than to the practices themselves, many of which have been largely shunned or even clearly condemned by a part of the Muslim population. This shift in the way maqāmāt are considered by Palestinian Muslims can be explained by several reasons. First, a major rate of literacy in the society, but also by a transformation of the Islam performed in the region, towards a more dogmatic and rigorist form, both influencing, for different reasons, the knowledge and interpretation of Islamic duties and rules. The occupation, as well as the social and economic context, with a continuous urbanization of the society. On the other hand, it seems that the cult of saints and practices related to maqāmāt is developing within the Jewish practices.

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<sup>4</sup> « La réinvention du mawsim de Nabî Sâlih : Les territoires palestiniens (1997- 2000) », Emma Aubin-Boltanski, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2003, pp.103-120.