

Travel to the Suyuti Cemetery El Sandouby

This report highlights the different perceptions of al-Suyuti Cemetery by its visitors and the fluctuations in its importance as a traveler's destination overtime. Focusing on the impressions and reactions of Arab and Muslim travelers of late medieval times and of Western travelers of the nineteenth century, this inquiry considers the conflicting claims of those tourists and pilgrims and explores what attracted them to visit the Cemetery. Today, organized tourism is more or less absent from this section of the Cemetery and very few travelers go there. However, present-day tourists spend less time in Cairo than earlier travelers and in the past al-Qarāfa was an essential stop for travelers and visitors to the city.

For Arab and Muslim travelers coming to the city, the Cemetery in general was often the first place to be visited. Meccan Pilgrims who came to Egypt on their way to the Hajj often stopped at al-Qarafa, making a ziyara circuit of the famous shrines located there. It was also a popular place for recreation for Cairenes in medieval times. Masses of pilgrims visited al-Qarāfa on moonlit nights and on Fridays, rendering it a celebrated pleasure resort especially during the Mamluk period.¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, going on donkey or carriage rides to see the cemetery was a popular attraction for western travelers.

The interests and perceptions of Western tourists of al-Qarafa as a travel destination were quite different from those of Muslim travelers. American, British and

¹ Tetsuya Ohtoshi, "The Manners, Customs, and Mentality of Pilgrims to the Egyptian City of the Dead: 1100-1500 A.D.," *Orient* 29 (1993): 19, 'Alā' Tāha Rizq, *'Amat Al-Qāhira Fī 'Asr Salātīn Al-Mamālīk* (Cairo: Ein for Human and Social Studies, 2003), 141.

other nineteenth century European travelers were fascinated with the cemetery, attracted by the picturesque qualities of the ruins planted in the desert, its towering minarets and imposing domes. On the other hand, Muslim travelers and pilgrims for the most part went there looking for the spiritual gains of visiting tombs and shrines of the learned and the righteous. To the Muslim traveler, these extraordinary monuments were nearly invisible.

While the visual forms and built environment of al-Qarafa were not essential to those Muslim travelers, the many practices that surrounded them were quite significant. The practice of collective ziyara to the tombs of the learned and the righteous was an important aspect of the cemetery for all Muslim travelers. Practices performed there by the residents and inhabitants of the cemetery, such as Qur'an reciters reading there day and night, were also noted and recorded in the writings of those travelers. Some spent a night or two at the cemetery; others stayed there and became residents of al-Qarafa. Some travelers lived inside the royal mausolea and became residents of the cemetery "*Qarāfi al-manzal*," others who stayed there were known for their *'ilm* and *manāqib* and had servants and followers.² As mentioned above, this area was a celebrated pleasure resort for residents of the city and its visitors. For example, storytellers narrated Arab heroic epics such as *Sīrat 'Antar* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* among the graves or near the Qarafa gate.³ Such pleasure activities must have added to the factors that encouraged medieval Muslim travelers to go out to the cemetery.

Narratives constructed around the virtues of al-Qarafa, and recorded in the works of geographers, *fada'il*, *masalik* and *ziyara* literature, were also recognized by most

² Abū'l Hasan Nūr al-Din 'Alī Ibn Ahmad Ibn 'Umar Ibn Khalaf Ibn Mahmūd al-Sakhāwī, *Tuhfat Al-Ahbāb Wa Bughyat Al-Tullāb Fī Al-Khitat Wa-L-Mazārāt Wa-L-Tarājim Wa-L-Biqā' Al-Mubārakāt* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhar, 1937), 183, 371.

³ *Ibid.*, 181.

Muslim travelers, and following those narratives, most of them made visitations to tombs of *'ulamā* and *sālihūn* buried there. Geographical works confirmed the importance of the Qarāfa as one of the *mahāsin* and *fadā'il* of misr and al-Qāhira and repeated the reports about its historical formation. al-Bakrī, the geographer of 5th cent. A.H., reiterated the common stories about al-Qarāfa: “There is no other cemetery in the world that is greater or more wondrous than this graveyard. Its *turba* is like camphor and saffron.” He also reported the story of 'Amr and the Caliph 'Umar and al-Muqawqas about the historical formation of al-Qarāfa and al-Muqattam having the seeds of paradise.⁴ The same narratives were reported by Ibn al-Faqīh (4th/10th century), al-Maqrīzī, and al-Muqaddasī (4th/10th), who also mentioned *sawāmi* ' at the Muqattam frequented Friday nights, the graves are white. These same narratives were reiterated in the writings of Muslim travelers.

Works of *masālik & mamālik* also emphasized those narratives but paid more attention to the cemetery's built environment. For example, Ibn Fadlallāh al-'Umarī (d. 749/1349) described al-Qarāfa as a great cemetery with great buildings (*al-'amā'ir al-dakhma*) and nice places for excursions.⁵ Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī counted the two Qarāfas among the *fadā'il* of misr and al-Qāhira, described al-Qarāfa al-sughrā as more urban and elegant (*a'mar wa ahsan hay'a*) than al-Qarāfa al-kubrā and compared it in size to the city of Homs.⁶ Ibn Zahīra also counted the two Qarāfas among the *mahāsin* of misr and al-Qāhira: “and they are *murābitūn* there with many *ziyāras*, Qur'an recitations and *dhikr*,

⁴ Abū Ubayd 'Abdallāh Ibn 'Abd al-Azīz al-Bakrī, *Al-Masālik Wa-L-Mamālik*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2003), 2: 149 - 51, 'Umar Ibn Muhammad Ibn Yūsuf Ibn al-Kindī, *Fadā'il Misr Al-Mahrūsa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1997), 44 - 46.

⁵ Ahmad Ibn Yahyā Ibn Fadlallāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik Al-Absār Fī Mamālik Al-Amsār* (al-'Ayn: Markaz Zāyd lil-Turāth, 2001), 257.

⁶ Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī, *Kitāb Zubdat Kashf Al-Mamālik Wa-Bayān Al-Turuq Wa-Al-Masālik*, repr. 1989 ed. (Paris: al-Matba`ah al-Jumhūriyah, 1894), 27.

they go there in the dark on specific nights to famous *mashāhid* with lights to visit the *awliyā* and sheikhs there.”⁷

Travelers, as well as residents of the city, went out to the cemetery, both collectively and individually, touring the shrines and tombs of the righteous, and certain provisions were set to ensure the continuation of these tours. Certain portions of waqf income were allocated for pilgrims and visitors to the Qarāfa (the waqf document of Amir Sudun Min Zāda (804/1401) stated that 20 dirhams were to be paid monthly to the group of visitors visiting the righteous in the Qarafa on Saturdays and Wednesdays - known as Ibn ‘Uthman group (ta’ifa) and those who would later replace them so that they would recite the Qur’an when they visit the righteous, and after reciting, they would pray for the donor of the waqf and his descendants).

Andalusian and North African travelers were more interested in the people they met there and the ‘ulamā buried at al-Qarāfa. They noted that shrines were inhabited by those who served it and lit its lamps or by the righteous (*ahl al-khayr wa-l-salāh wa-l-dīn*). They also talked about prominent ‘ulamā who lived inside the royal mausolea at al-Qarāfa (for example, that of al-‘Ādil Kitbughā): al-Shihāb al-Abraqūhī *nazīl al-qarāfa* (a learned traveler from Shīrāz who settled there and became a resident of al-Qarāfa). They also mentioned several Sufis who carried the *nisba* “al-Qarāfī.” The tomb of al-Suyuti was an important spot for late travelers, the tombs of less famous ‘*ulama* and *fidala* were also mentioned. A few Muslim travelers, still, expressed their interest in the cemetery’s built environment, referred to it as an independent city with “graceful domes and houses”

⁷ Ibn Zahīra, *Al-Fadā’il Al-Bāhira Fī Mahāsin Misr Wa-L-Qāhira* (Cairo: Matbū’āt Dār al-Kutub, 1969), 191.

and described it as a large separate city, with its markets and mosques. The following are some of the reactions and perceptions of Arab and Muslim travelers who visited the cemetery. Accounts by Muslim travelers are particularly important because they reveal the way in which Muslims viewed the cemetery and reacted to its space. Most of them recorded their impressions of the cemetery in general, very few referred specifically to our area.

Ibn al-Jubayr (rihla 6th/12th century) spent a night at al-Qarāfa and described it as “one of the wonders of the world” because of the famous *karāmāt* and strange *anbā’* of the blessed people buried there. He visited the Ahl al-bayt buried at al-Qarāfa, saw white domes covering mosques there, and mentioned that it was a place of gathering, that people stayed there overnight, and that those who recited the Qur’an at the graves lived there. Ibn al-Jubayr found it “extraordinary that this Qarāfa is filled with built mosques and inhabited shrines in which strangers, *‘ulamā*, the righteous and the poor find sanctuary.”⁸ Ibn Sa‘īd (Andalusī, mid 7th/13th century 640/1243) spent many nights at the Qarāfa, mentioned that it had *manāzil* for the *a’yān* of al-Fustāt and al-Qāhira and graves with well kept buildings, the madrasa of al-Shāfi‘ī always had *tarab* festivities especially during moonlit nights. “It is the place of most social gatherings of the people of Misr and their most celebrated pleasure resort.”⁹ al-‘Abdarī (rihla started 688/1289): Stayed at al-Madrasa al-Kāmiliyya, visited the Ahl al-bayt then al-Imam al-Shāfi‘ī at the Qarafa and

⁸ Abū'l Husayn Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn al-Jubayr, *Rihlat Ibn Al-Jubayr* (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1964), 20 - 24.

⁹ 'Alī Ibn Musā Ibn Sa‘īd al-Andalusī, *Al-Mughrab Fī Hulā Al-Maghrīb* (Cairo: Matba'at Gāmi'at Fu'ād al-Awwal, 1953), 10 - 11.

noted that in the Qarafa and other places in Misr numerous tombs of the *'ulamā* and *sālihīn*.¹⁰

al-Tijībī al-Sibtī (d.730/1329): Andalusian pilgrim traveling to Mecca, went to al-Qāhira 696/1296 (around same time as al-'Abdarī), studied at al-Madrassa al-Kāmiliya: during his stay in Cairo, he frequented the two qarāfas especially al-Qarāfa al-Sughrā to visit the tombs of *awliyā* and *fudalā*. He noted that al-Qarāfa, which he first entered in 696, had countless shrines and graves, that the most renowned of these shrines were inhabited by those who served it and lit its lamps or by the righteous (*ahl al-khayr wa-l-salāh wa-l-dīn*). Noted that one of the prominent *'ulamā* lived inside one of the royal mausolea at al-Qarāfa, that of al-'Ādil Kitbughā: al-Shihāb al-Abraqūhī *nazīl al-qarāfa*, a learned traveler from Shīrāz who settled there and became a resident of al-Qarāfa, also mentioned several Sufis who carried the *nisba* "al-Qarāfī."¹¹ Ibn Battūta (726/1326): described the great Qarāfa of Misr: "they build there the graceful domes and they build houses and arrange for Qur'an reciters to read there day and night." Noted that people go to spend the night there with their women and children every Thursday and on the night of *nisf* Sha'ban.¹²

al-Balawī (from al-Andalus, 8th/14th century): After a tour of the *mashāhid* of Ahl al-bayt in al-Qāhira, he headed to al-Qarāfa, described it as a large separate city, with its markets and mosques, one of the wonders with what it comprised of *mashāhid* of the Prophets, Ahl al-bayt, the Companions, the Followers, the learned, and with its *zuhhād*

¹⁰ Abū 'Abdallāh Muhammad al-'Abdarī, *Rihlat Al-'Abdarī Al-Musammāh Al-Rihla Al-Maghribiyya* (Fez: Jāmi'at Muhammad al-Khāmis, 1968), 152.

¹¹ al-Qāsim Ibn Yūsuf al-Tajībī al-Sibtī, *Mustafād Al-Rihla Wa-L-Ightirāb* (Libya, Tunis: al-Dār al-'Arabiyya li-l-Kitāb, 1975), 142 - 63.

¹² Abū 'Abdallāh Muhammad Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn Battūta, *Rihlat Ibn Battūta* (Beirut: Dār Sādir lil-Tibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1964), 39 - 40.

and *awliyā* with famous *karāmāt* and strange *anbā*'. Listed the famous tombs and shrines located there, with magnificent structures built over each one of those graves, inscribed with their names (such as the tombs of al-Nātiq who talked from his grave and al-Sāmit who did not speak for forty years). To the south of al-Qarāfa an open ground known as *qubūr al-shuhadā*' (those martyred with Sāriya).¹³ al-Qalsādī (d. 891) stopped at al-Qarāfa during his travel from Granada only mentioned maqām al-Imam al-Shafi'ī.¹⁴ al-Qaysī (*rihla* between 1040-1042/1630-1633): Visited al-Qarāfa on a Friday in Shawwal, only mentions names of those buried in al-Qarāfa, repeats what Ibn al-Jubayr said about it, describes in detail the shrine of Imam al-Shāfi'ī.¹⁵

'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī (d.1143/1731): visited al-Qarāfa in 1105/1694 part of his tour of shrines of Ahl al-bayt and the righteous, after Zayn al-'Ābidīn, he went to visit al-Qarāfa, then Bāb Zuwayla, al-Sayyida Nafīsa, went to other shrines around the city then back to al-Qarāfa, (from Abū'l Su'ūd al-Jarhī) he went to Qusun (the mosque), "in the street outside Bāb Zuwayla" then to the Qusun mosque inside Bāb al-Qarāfa in the direction of the Khānqāh of Qusun, built by Amīr Sayf al-Dīn Qusun, from there he visited al-Suyuti, noted that he was buried in a special place (*makān makhsūs bih*) surrounded by other tombs and that his tomb had a green textile covering and a dome built on a nice building (*qubba mabniyya fī bayt latīf*). Also noted that the door to the noble shrine was opened for them, they visited and read the *fātiha*. Next he visited the

¹³ Khālid Ibn 'Isā al-Balawī, *Tāj Al-Mafriq Fī Tahliyat 'Ulamā' Al-Mashriq*, 2 vols. (Rabat: Sundūq Ihyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmī al-Mushtarak, 1970), 1: 223 - 24.

¹⁴ Abī'l Hasan 'Alī al-Qalsādī, *Rihlat Al-Qalsādī* (Tunis: Societe Tunisienne de Diffusion, 1978), 128.

¹⁵ Abī 'Abdallāh Muhammad al-Qaysī, *Uns Al-Sārī Wa-L-Sārib Min Aqtār Al-Maghārib Wa-L-Ma'ārib Sayyid Al-A'ājim Wa-L-A'ārib* (Fez: 1968), 55 - 60.

tomb of Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Mifāghī outside then went up the citadel where they saw the place where the *kiswa* was made.¹⁶

al-Hasan Ibn Muhammad al-Wizzān (1494-1552) Leo Africanus: Entered Egypt in 1517 on his way to Mecca -Talked about visiting al-Qarafa, mentioned that people carried baskets of food with them to distribute there. Noted that the suburb of Qarafa was “built in manner of a town,” that it contained almost two thousand households, but that at his time the greatest part of it was destroyed, “Here are many sepulchers built with high and stately vaults and arches and adorned on the inner side with emblems and colors, which the fond people adore as the sacred shrines and monuments of saints, spreading the pavement with sumptuous and rich carpets. Here every Friday morning resort out of the city and the suburbs great multitudes of people for devotions sake, who bestow liberal and large alms.”¹⁷

Mustafā ‘Alī – in Egypt 1568 and 1599: noted that countless people go out to the cemetery every Friday, starting at the time of the Morning Prayer, walking or riding, after having visited the graves of “his sanctity the Imam al-Shāfi‘ī (...) and of Imam Abu l-Laith, they arrive at the grave of Sitt Nafisa.” Noted that women took green plants and flowers to graves of their relatives and visit the tombs of the dead with fragrant herbs. “But the Sheikhs go with banners and chanting litanies.”¹⁸ On Fridays, during visits to al-Qarāfa, “their women usually meet there with the *jundīs* (...) use the opportunity at the sacred places for making the arrangements [for a rendezvous]. Then they go to the usual

¹⁶ ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, *Al-Haqīqa Wa-L-Majāz Fī Al-Rihla Īlā Bilād Al-Shām Wa Misr Wa-L-Hijāz*, 3 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Ma‘rifā, 1998), 2: 116, 83 - 84.

¹⁷ Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained, Written by Al-Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al-Wezaz, Al-Fasi, a Moor, Baptized as Giovanni Leone, but Better Known as Leo Africanus. Done into English in the Year 1600 by John Pory, and Now Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Dr. Robert Brown*, 3 vols. (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1896), 3: 877.

¹⁸ Mustafa Ali, *Mustafa Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599. Text, Transliteration, Translation, Notes*, trans. Andreas Tietze (Wien: Verl. d. Österr. Akad. d. Wiss., 1975), 33.

places of sin and adultery. Although it is the duty of the ruling governor to stop this, they won't do it. Even if this were brought to their attention, they would not listen with an ear of acceptance."¹⁹ Mustafa Ali also reported that Bedouin horsemen rob and plunder those who "go to Karafa, those who pass by the Bāb al-Nasr, or those who pass through Old Cairo."²⁰

Mustafa Ali also included this interesting depiction of funerary practices at the cemetery: "They do not carry their dead [to their grave] with the procedure and symbols that are customary in Rūm. In their way it may not be easy to tell whether [the deceased] is a man or a woman. It is strange to see them walk in front [of the coffin] reciting now a litany of praise of God, now the formula of ritual worship, and behind [the coffin] the clamor and lamentations in the voices of the hired wailing women. After the funeral prayer, the corpse remains alone with a few close friends or relatives and is taken to be buried, with only a few blind men stumbling after it up to the grave itself. However, that depending on their fortune, one or two bulls are paraded in front of the funeral of certain rich people, and that behind them on covered trays bread and dates and a platter of salt are carried along up to the grave; that when the corpse is lowered into the grave the sacrificial animal is slaughtered, cut up and distributed to the poor together with the bread and salt that have been brought there on the trays; and that thereafter the dates, those God-made sweets, are also handed out to the poor and needy, - these are indeed reasonable acts."²¹

Ishāq Sakmānī, a 19th century Iraqi patriarch who visited Cairo in the early 1870s: After a tour of the Citadel and the Muhammad 'Alī Mosque, he visited the eastern side of

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

²¹ Ibid., 42.

the city, saw “ruined minarets, from which only the bases remained, and ancient Muslim tombs, some looked like subterranean vaults (sarādīb), others looked like deep wells.” Went to Barqūq mosque after that.²² al-Khāmīs al-Tunīsī (1840-1889): Visited al-Husayn, ahl al-bayt, al-Imām al-Shāfi‘ī and “other mashāhid and maqāms” in al-Qarāfa during time of Khedive Tawfīq.²³

The perceptions and reactions of nineteenth century Western travelers visiting the cemetery were different from those of Muslim travelers. They were more interested in the cemetery’s built environment and went there primarily to see the magnificent deserted tombs and minarets. Donkey rides to the Cemetery were common: “There is no better way to see Cairo than from the spine of a donkey.”²⁴ Carriage rides to our area were popular as well, coming via Bab al-Qarafa. It was considered one of the popular sites in the environs of Cairo (listed with other places like the Roda Island, Shoubra and Heliopolis) – Baedeker mentioned that it was most conveniently visited via the Bab al-Qarāfa, and mentioned that a few of its monuments were of “architectural or artistic interest.”²⁵ Tours there were also combined with visits to the Muskī, as one traveler explained:²⁶ “We drove the length of the Muski and on east some distance through deep sand and blinding dust to the Tombs of the Khalifahs and the Mamelukes, which extend southward along the entire eastern border of Cairo.”²⁷ What follows are some of the

²² Ishāq Sakmānī, *Rihlat Al-Sakmānī. 1869-1871 (Al-Musil - Rumā - Istanbul - Al-Qāhira - Al-Musil)* (Baghdad: 2002), 165.

²³ Muhammad Ibn Mustafā Bayram, *Safwat Al-I’tibār Bi-Mustawda’ Al-Amsār Wa-L-Aqtār*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1974), 2: 84 - 85.

²⁴ George W. Caldwell, *Oriental Rambles* (New York: G. W. Caldwell, 1906), 227.

²⁵ Karl Baedeker, *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers* (Leipsic: Karl Baedeker, 1902), 68.

²⁶ J. J. Malone, *The Purple East. Notes of Travel* (Melborne: W. P. Linehan, 1911), 123.

²⁷ Blanche Mabury Carson, *From Cairo to the Cataract* (Boston: L.C. Page & Co., 1909), 97.

Western travelers' impressions that might contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the cemetery's space was received and imagined during the nineteenth century.

Denon (1747-1825), an artist and one of the members of Napoleon's expedition, wrote of Cairo's cemetery: "In quitting the rubbish of Cairo the stranger is astonished to see another town. It is built of white marble where edifices, raised on columns and terminated by domes, or by painted, carved and gilded planquins, form a cheerful and inviting picture."²⁸ He noted that these burial grounds were also venues for social gatherings: "Between the hundreds of tombs are avenues, almost like streets, where people can stroll and sit on the stone benches provided for them. The custom is to visit the family tomb each Friday at daybreak. There, mourners can pray, plant flowers and scatter aromatic leaves. Women and children go with the men. The crowd of visitors is immense. It is a spectacle at once religious and touching."²⁹

John Lloyd Stephens, an American who traveled to Egypt in the 1830s, went there after visits to the Bāb al-Nasr area, the Tombs of the Caliphs and the Citadel: "In this great city of the dead stand the tombs of the Mamelukes, originally slaves from the foot of the Caucasus, then the lords and tyrants of Egypt, and now an exterminated race; the tombs are large, handsome buildings, with domes and minarets, the interior of the domes beautifully wrought, and windows of stained glass, all going to ruins. Here, too, the tomb of the pasha, called the greatest structure of modern Egypt."³⁰

²⁸ Vivant Denon, *Voyage Dans La Basse Et La Haute Égypte, Pendant Les Campagnes Du GÉNÉRAL Bonaparte* (London: 1802), 104.

²⁹ Vivant Denon, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt in Company with Several Divisions of the French Army During the Campaigns of General Bonaparte in That Country*, trans. Arthur Aikin, 3 vols. (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 1: 283, Terrence M. Russell, *The Discovery of Egypt. Vivant Denon's Travels with Napoleon's Army* (Sutton Publishing, 2005), 99 - 101.

³⁰ John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 29 - 30.

Damer (d. 1848), who visited the tombs of the Caliphs and Mamluks after an expedition to Boulac and a Nile boat ride to Rhoda, wrote this entry in her diary: “We took an interesting ride to the tombs of the Caliphs and Mameluke kings, which are highly picturesque and very magnificent, but fast falling to decay, though by the commonest repair their architectural beauty might so well be preserved. Mehemet Ali has provided himself with a most comfortable family sepulchre, not far from this quarter, consisting of three dry, warm, well-carpeted apartments; the only comfortable rooms I have found at Cairo there are at least thirty monuments in them, dedicated to his brothers, nieces, and grandchildren. On our return we made a circuit by the citadel, to see the beautiful effect of the setting sun sinking behind the Pyramids.”³¹

W. H. Gregory who wrote a narrative of a journey from Marseilles to Egypt and Nubia in 1855 and 1856 took rides in the environs of Cairo going through the Great Bazaar and the heart of the town until arriving at the foot of the Citadel, “you strike away to the right under the Mokattam range of hills, and shortly find yourself among the undisputed precincts of the dead. You wander along by tomb after tomb, with its square highly ornamented tower and graceful dome.”³² “Persons of even ordinary means have enclosed places of sepulture of considerable dimensions, and surrounded each of them by its own walls. We can thus readily understand how often in Arabian stories, the benighted traveler, unable to enter the city gates which close at sunset, selects a tomb for his hostelry; and in the Gospel we read of one who made them his usual residence. Indeed, I am by no means sure that, in the course of my wanderings, I shall not have to select a

³¹ Mary Georgiana Emma Seymour Dawson Damer, "Diary of a Tour in Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and the Holy Land," (London: Henry Colburn, 1841), 2: 167.

³² W. H. Gregory, *Egypt in 1855 and 1856; Tunis in 1857 and 1858*, 2 vols. (London: John Russell Smith), 1: 56.

similar spot for repose, with a confident hope there maybe nothing worse than ghouls to disturb nocturnal quiet.”³³

“I purposely omit any account of the particular tombs we visited: partly because they contain the remains of a dynasty which has left but little behind to interest posterity, but chiefly because our guide so jumbled up one with another, that a fresh visit will be required to clear up the confusion.”³⁴ The same afternoon, visited Sultan Hasan: “The only mosque that is worth a visit within Cairo.”³⁵

Lucie Duff Gordon visited the Tombs of the Mamelukes in the 1860s on her way home after visiting the bazaar and the tombs of the Khalifah: “I returned home through endless streets and squares of Muslim tombs, those of the Mamelukes among them. It was very striking; and it was getting so dark that I thought of Nurreddin Bey, and wondered if a Jinn would take me anywhere if I took up my night’s lodging in one of the comfortable little copula-covered buildings.”³⁶

Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900) admired the view from the terrace of the Muhammad Alī Mosque and the tombs of the Memlooks “with their fairy domes and exquisite minarets and the encompassing grey desert, the whole bathed in violet light, have a beauty that will linger with one who has once seen them forever.”³⁷

The road to al-Qarāfa: “We drive out the gate or Bab e’Nasr beyond the desolate Moslem cemetery to go to the tombs of the Circassian Memlook Sultans. We pass round and amid hills of rubbish, dirt, and broken pottery, the dumpings of the city for centuries and travel

³³ Ibid., 1: 57.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 1: 63.

³⁶ Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt (1862-1869)* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 49.

³⁷ Charles Dudley Warner, *My Winter on the Nile* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884), 75 - 76.

a road so sandy that the horses can scarcely drag the heavy carriage through it.”³⁸

Describing the monuments: “They are remarkable for the beautiful and varied forms of their minarets and for their aerial domes; the latter are covered with the most wonderful arabesque carving and tracing. They stand deserted, with the sand drifting about them, and falling to rapid decay. In the interiors are still traces of exquisite carving and color, but much of the ornamentation, being of stucco on rude wooden frames, only adds to the appearance of decay.”³⁹

Pierre Loti (1850-1923) took a night carriage ride to the outskirts of Cairo and described what he saw at the Cemetery: “At the end of this town of the dead, the desert again opens before us its mournful whitened expanse. On such a night as this, when the wind blows cold and the misty moon shows like a sad opal, it looks like a steppe under snow. But it is a desert planted with ruins, with the ghosts of mosques; a whole colony of high tumbling domes are scattered here at hazard on the shifting extent of the sands. And what strange old-fashioned domes they are! The archaism of their silhouettes strikes us from the first, as much as their isolation in such a place. They look like bells, or gigantic dervish hats placed on pedestals, and those farthest away give the impression of squat, large-headed figures posted there as sentinels, watching the vague horizon of Arabia beyond. (...) Nowadays, it is true, some visits are beginning to be paid to them—on winter nights when the moon is full and they throw on the sands their great clear-cut shadows. At such times the light is considered favourable, and they rank among the

³⁸ Ibid., 76.

³⁹ Ibid., 76 - 77.

curiosities exploited by the agencies. (...) There are no roads of any kind; they would indeed be as useless as they are impossible to make.”⁴⁰ (Northern Cemetery)

Those travelers also noted and recorded their impressions of the cemetery’s social life and were interested in the people who lived there. They noted that the custom was to visit the family tomb each Friday at daybreak and that the mourners pray there, plant flowers and scatter aromatic leaves and that women and children used to go there with men. This traveler described the social scene at the cemetery, illustrating the widespread interest in the human dimension of the space: “It is not correct, however, to speak of these mosque-tombs as deserted. Into all of them have crept families of the poor or the vicious. And the business of the occupants, who call themselves guardians, is to extract backsheesh from the visitor. Spinning, knitting, baking and all the simple household occupations go on the courts and in the gaunt rooms; one tomb is used as a grist-mill. The women and girls dwelling there go unveiled; they were tattooed slightly upon the chin and the forehead, as most Egyptian women are; some of the younger were pretty, with regular features and handsome dark eyes. Near the mosques are lanes of wretched homes, occupied by as wretched people. The whole mortal neighborhood swarms (life out of death) with children; they are as thick as jars at a pottery factory; they are as numerous as the flies that live on the rims of their eyes and noses; they are as naked as, most of them, as when they were born. The distended condition of their stomachs testify that they have plenty to eat, and they tumble about in the dirt, in the full enjoyment of this delicious climate. People can afford to be poor when nature is their friend.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Pierre Loti, "Egypt," (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1909), 99 - 102.

⁴¹ Warner, *My Winter on the Nile*, 77.

A modern day fellow traveler commented: “there is nothing new about people living in the City of the Dead, for they always did, attendant upon the tombs and mosques and in the service of the schools and religious institutions which were part of the great complex; what is new is that the present day population of the City of the Dead lives in the tombs themselves, and not because they have nowhere else to live but because they like it there and the rent is very low. In the heat of the Cairo summer there is an immense advantage in living in the cool tombs.”⁴²

Moreover, many travelers were disappointed at finding the cemetery too ruined for their expectations: “They were showy when first erected; but they are cobbled up stones, plastered and whitewashed, without any enduring properties. Some are broken in the walls; others have neither doors nor windows; and all of them are destined to utter annihilation.”⁴³ Another traveler commented about the disappointment of seeing only ruins after seeing the lofty and elegant minarets from a distance: “The Tombs of the Mamelukes south of the Citadel in more need of repair at the hands of the Wakfs commission... The sculpturing of the exterior is in some cases exquisite. Several are enriched by bands of porcelain, containing inscriptions in white letters upon a colored ground. In others, discs of porcelain figure among the interstices of the variegated molding. None of the monuments, situated in what has often been a battleground, have remained intact, and time is making ahavoc with some of the most beautiful, as every traveler notes with regret.”⁴⁴ Eustace Reynolds-Ball also noted the misleading name

⁴² Ethel Mannin, *Aspects of Egypt. Some Travels in the United Arab Republic* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 203 - 04.

⁴³ J. V. C. Smith, *Pilgrimage to Egypt, Embracing a Diary of Explorations on the Nile; with Observations Illustrative of the Manners, Customs, and Institutions of the People, and of the Present Condition of the Antiquities and Ruins with Numerous Engravings* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1852), 226.

⁴⁴ Eustace A Reynolds-Ball, *The City of the Caliphs; a Popular Study of Cairo and Its Environs and the Nile and Its Antiquities* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1897), 154.

“Tombs of the Mamelukes,” that nothing remained of these tombs but the minarets, domes and some portions of the outer walls and that hardly anything is known of the builders.

Those travelers’ expectations and perceptions of the cemetery were shaped by the illustrated travel literature of the nineteenth century that was most certainly known to them and that they often carried with them. Nearly every book written by or for travelers to Cairo in the nineteenth century had an illustration that was labeled “The Tombs of the Mamelukes” usually with a view of the domes of al-Sultaniyya and the minarets coming out of the desert sand around it. Similar views and drawings also appeared on postcards and stereographs. Scholarly works written by eminent explorers also included engravings and illustrations depicting the domes of al-Sultaniyya or general views of the cemetery with the ancient aqueduct and the Pyramids in the background.⁴⁵ Francis Frith’s prints of the tombs in the Southern Cemetery appeared in the album *Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine*.⁴⁶ Those images tell us something about what was considered memorable and worthy of recording for the western traveler visiting the cemetery in the nineteenth century.

Interest in visiting the cemetery was stimulated mainly by its picturesque appeal. Travelers and writers about the city commented on the picturesque qualities of these views: “From the Citadel can be seen a panorama of Cairo which can never be forgotten. The best time to see it is at sunset when the peculiar azure and golden haze of Egypt add

⁴⁵ Stanley Lane-Poole’s entry on Cairo in the edited volume “Picturesque Palestine Sinai and Egypt” included several illustrations featuring the cemetery, but the text made no mention of it. Stanley Lane-Poole, “Cairo,” in *Picturesque Palestine Sinai and Egypt*, ed. Colonel Wilson (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883), 2: 387, 92.

⁴⁶ Francis Frith, *Egypt and the Holy Land in Historic Photographs. 77 Views by Francis Frith; Introduction & Bibliography by Julia Van Haften; Selection & Commentary by Jon E. Manchip White* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), Kathleen Stewart Howe, *Excursions Along the Nile: The Photographic Discovery of Ancient Egypt* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1993), Pl. 70, Douglas R. Nickel, *Francis Frith in Egypt and Palestine. A Victorian Photographer Abroad* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 58 - 59.

their magical charm to the picture. Nearby are the half ruined tombs of the Mameluke Sultans, clustered upon the desert sand at the foot of the Muqattam hills.”⁴⁷ Douglas Sladen who wrote a chapter titled: “Concerning the Tombs of the Caliphs and the Mamelukes; and Mohammedan Funerals” pointed out the beautiful spectacle to be seen from the hills looking at the Tombs of the Caliphs especially at sunset: “The Tombs of the Mamelukes are not equal to those of the Caliphs, and their immediate setting is not so picturesque, for they are entangled in a humble part of the city. But viewed from above, as for example, from the windows of the palace of the Khedives on the Citadel, they are strikingly beautiful, for they stretch a long finger into the desert under the shadow of the rocky Mokattams, whose skyline is broken once, twice, by ancient ruins and beyond them you can see both the western and the eastern desert with the steely ribbon of the Nile between. The Kodaker will find both the Tombs of the Caliphs and the Tombs of the Mamelukes paradises, for they are full of fantastic buildings in unbroken sunshine, and he can generally secure a clean background of desert. And this is, oh, so important in Egypt, where the strength of the light and the clearness of the atmosphere frequently make an object which is a good distance off, come right behind and clash with the object he is photographing.”⁴⁸

Guidebooks advised travelers to go there by sunset as the tombs were considered highly picturesque during this time: “A visit to the Tombs of the Khalifs (and to a certain degree to the Tombs of the Mamelukes also) is exceedingly interesting, esp. towards sunset, owing to the very novel and curious picture they present.”⁴⁹ The 1902 Baedeker

⁴⁷ Caldwell, *Oriental Rambles*, 235 - 36.

⁴⁸ Douglas Sladen, *Oriental Cairo. The City of the "Arabian Nights"* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1911), 217 - 18.

⁴⁹ Baedeker, *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*, 64.

Marked a point on map (to the right of the road to the Citadel) to take photographs of the Tombs of the Khalifas: “commanding an admirable retrospect of the necropolis. (...) A fine effect, especially by evening-light, is produced by the domes and the peculiar coloring of the valley and the opposite heights of the Mokattam.”⁵⁰

John Murray’s *Handbook for Travelers* described the Cemeteries of Cairo in some detail (Tombs of the Caliphs, Tombs of the Bahrite Mamluks, the Circassian Mamluks) and *The Tombs of the Mamluks: Imam al-Shafi‘ī and Hawsh al-Pasha* - “Many of the tombs near to the city to this side are also curious and offer interesting subjects for the pencil of the artist.”⁵¹ Thomas Cook’s tourists’ handbook for Egypt listed the tombs of the Mamluks under “Interesting Spots” in the neighborhood of Cairo that may be visited only if time allows: “Beautiful examples of Saracenic mausoleums, now almost entirely given over to wild dogs and outcast Arabs.”⁵²

Translated versions of the pre-World War II Baedekers were very popular among English speaking tourists. The 1929 Baedeker, which was still in use fifty years after its publication by travelers of the 1970s, included a visit to the Tombs of the Caliphs (no visit to our qarafa is included).⁵³ Baedeker’s *Egypt* of 1902 included the Cemetery along with the Roda Island and Old (Coptic) Cairo among the interesting points in the immediate neighborhood of Cairo: “The Tombs of the Mamelukes, to the south of the Citadel, including monuments of various periods, are most conveniently visited via the Bab el-Karafeh, whence a good carriage-road leads through the midst of the tombs to the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 67 - 68.

⁵¹ John Murray, *A Handbook for Travellers in Egypt; Including Descriptions of the Course of the Nile to the Second Cataract, Alexandria, Cairo, the Pyramids, and Thebes, the Overland Transit to India, the Peninsula of Mount Sinai, the Oases* (London: J. Murray, 1858), 132 - 39.

⁵² Thomas Cook Ltd., "Cook's Tourists' Handbook for Egypt, the Nile, and the Desert," (London: T. Cook & Son, 1897), 165.

⁵³ Hans Koning, *A New Yorker in Egypt* (New York & London: 1976), 153, 205.

Hosh el-Basha. The tombs approach close to the city and extend as far to the slopes of the Mokattam. The older tombs are in much poorer preservation than the tombs of the Khalifas, owing to their conversion into modern burial places. Some are now only represented by their minarets. A few are of architectural and artistic interest; but historical data as to the names of their builders are entirely wanting, for the extant inscriptions upon them are almost exclusively verses of the Kor'an."⁵⁴

Those travelers' accounts show that attitudes toward the cemetery were variable; their appreciation and reactions to the cemetery were as diverse as their backgrounds. Accounts from Muslim travelers tell us very little about the visual appearance or provide us with vague information about the built forms of this section of al-Qarāfa because they were mainly concerned with the practices performed there and the virtue of visiting those buried in it. Information about Muslim travelers' movement within the cemetery is also sparse. In contrast, the significance of the cemetery and its appeal to the western traveler was due mainly to its visual qualities and scenic appeal. The foremost attraction for the Western traveler was the picturesque view from a distance of the desert planted with fairy domes and exquisite minarets. These scenes moved most travelers to expressions of admiration. The dense urban fabric that surrounds al-Suyuti Cemetery today changed the picturesque qualities of the cemetery and concealed its scenic appeal from most travelers.

⁵⁴ Baedeker, *Egypt. Handbook for Travellers*, 68.

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