

## Article

# The Ashura Assemblage: Karbala's Religious Urban Fabric and Reproduction of Collective Shi'i Identity

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**Abstract:** Assemblage theory complicates an already extensive literature on religious urbanity, cultural heritage, the social construction of space and the power of place. Nevertheless, the concept can be applied to social and religious history in locations such as West Asia. As this paper argues, avoiding dichotomous and politicised treatments of Karbala in dynamics of the Sunni–Shia divide and debates concerning the so-called “Karbala Paradigm”, the “Ashura Assemblage” demonstrates how space contributes to the reproduction of collective Shi'i identity in Karbala. It outlines aspects of territoriality and sacralised Shi'i rituals, tracing constantly recurring connections between various sacred spots, spaces and places of ritual. This study then illustrates how collective Shi'i identity is mnemonically connected to Ashura-oriented spaces. This study utilises representational tools such as maps and diagrams to depict Karbala's religious urban landscape. Ethnographic fieldwork and an array of primary and secondary source research uncover granularities in the Ashura Assemblage, suggesting a more prominent role for interpretive approaches to atomistic assemblages of urban religious spaces.

**Keywords:** Shi'i Islam; Karbala; Ashura; collective identity; historical sociology; assemblage theory



**Citation:** Parkes, Aidan. 2021. The Ashura Assemblage: Karbala's Religious Urban Fabric and Reproduction of Collective Shi'i Identity. *Religions* 12: 904. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100904>

Academic Editor: Terry Lovat

Received: 28 June 2021

Accepted: 28 July 2021

Published: 19 October 2021

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## 1. Introduction

“Karbala is the noblest region of the earth, and the most honourable place on earth, where your grandson [Imam al-Husayn] and his people would be martyred”.

—(Ja'far Muhammad b. Quluwayh al-Qummī [d. 367 AH/976], 1997, p. 276)

The sacred Shi'i shrine city of Karbala is located approximately 100 km southeast of Baghdad, 20 km west of the Euphrates River. The shrine city's population has grown from 20,000 residents in 1843 (Litvak 1990, p. 41) to over 600,000 in 2020. In 1919, Nakash (1993) estimated Karbala's population to be approximately 85,000 (p. 41). Of which, 65,000 were Iranians, and 25,000 identified as Arabs (p. 41). The 20th-century Persian clerical migration to Karbala contributed to the city's urban religious fabric and the reproduction of collective transnational Shi'i identity. Having several pilgrimage places and spaces with a rich social history, imbued with meaning where myth and reason coalesce, the city's assemblage of Ashura-oriented spaces, its sites of collective pasts, and places of ritualized—and poetically ritualized—sacred landscape, combine cultural heritage and natural experience. This study examines Karbala's unique major and minor sacred pilgrimage spaces and how they reproduce collective transnational Shi'i identity. This study is divided into four sections. The first section examines Karbala's geo-cultural significance in Shi'ism as a focal point of transnational pilgrimage through the events of Ashura. The section underlines the significance of Karbala by discussing the importance of infallibility in Shi'ism. The second section discusses Karbala's major and minor pilgrimage places and spaces. The third section demonstrates how the city and its environs represents a broader locus of pilgrimage and collective Shi'i identity. The final section depicts several spaces of prescribed ritual in

and around Karbala, geographically relevant to the historical events of Ashura. This study concludes by highlighting how Karbala's cultural landscape locus informs the space's ideological representation as a sacred representation and reminder of Shi'i history, identity, heritage, memory and pilgrimage.

Karbala's rich Shi'i cultural landscape locus informs the space's ideological representation. As space historically informed by memory, myth, pilgrimage, ritual and culture, Karbala is culturally constructed by the collective consciousness Shi'i spiritually imbue through individual experience. While Karbala may be constructed as a city, it is viewed in Shi'i cultural heritage as a sacred spatial representation and reminder of identity, cultural heritage and pilgrimage. The ideological fabric of Karbala's cultural landscape reproduces values and religious traditions and inspires individual human spirituality and experience. Collective Shi'i identity is reproduced through performative rituals, narrative historiographies and sacred spaces. Poetically prescribed through ritual, second-rate spaces are historical spaces and spots relevant to the events of Ashura. These include (a) Imam al-Husayn's encampments, (b) historical meeting places relevant to Ashura, (c) *maqams* (situational place) and (d) second-rate epiphenomenal shrines and mosques such as the Zaynab Hillock and the al-Hurr district and shrine. The intertextuality of Ashura enhances its perceptual value as both tangible and intangible representations and reminders of Imam al-Husayn and the events of Ashura.

## 2. Background: Karbala and the Events of Ashura

Karbala became spatially prominent in the Muslim world almost immediately after the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (61AH/680AD) during the Battle of Karbala. Shi'i Islam memorialises Imam al-Husayn and his followers each year during the holy month of *Muharram*, which culminates on *Ashura* (the tenth day), signifying the death of Imam al-Husayn and his partisans on Yazid I's orders. Despite harsh and strict prohibition by the Abbasid caliph al-Mutawakkil, Karbala began to attract pilgrims in approximately 850 AD (Bloom 2015, p. 230). The earliest accounts of the events of Ashura can be found in Ibn Sa'd's (d.230AH/845AD) *al-Tabaqāt al-kubrā* (The book of major classes). Tabātabā'i (1989) carried out a complete translation of this text with an accompanying analysis in Persian. The 10th-century Muslim geographer Ibn Hawqal documented his visit to Karbala in 366AH/977AD in his famous work *Kitāb Sūrat al-ard* (The face of the earth) (Hawqal 2014). At the tomb of Imam Husayn, Ibn Hawqal observed a large *mashhad* (martyrdom site) with doors on either side (p. 166). The ancient shrine city of Karbala is central to collective Shi'a identity and memory in scholarship, pilgrimage and politics. The city is an important site of cultural heritage and identity in Shi'i Islam for several reasons. Karbala contains the shrines of Imam al-Husayn and al-Abbās b. 'Alī, two of the sons of the first Infallible Imam 'Ali, the first Imam in Shi'i Islam. Moreover, the city represents a spatio-temporal reminder of the events of Ashura.

Karbala's genealogy often traces to the Karbala Massacre of 61 AH/680 and the development of a resistance identity through and in the name of Ashura. However, in Al-Qummī (Al-Qummī 1997)'s *Kāmil al-zīyārāt* (Visiting holy shrines and places), edited and first published by Allama 'Abd al-Husayn Amini (Al-Qummī 1997), there is a hadith on the authority of the fifth Infallible Imam Muhammad al-Baqir asserting that God created Karbala 24,000 years ahead of the Kaabah, hence its eternal and primordial sanctity (p. 288). Hitti (1961) also contests claims that this divide began with the Ashura event. Instead, he traces the divide to the day when certain Meccans could not find Imam Ali to be so close to the Prophet Muhammad, notably when the former was announced and introduced as the immediate successor to the Prophet Muhammad on the Day of Ghadir Khum (p. 221). It is worth noting Allama Amini devoted his life to the 9 volume, 40-year (12 composition of *al-Ghadir fi-kitāb wa al-sunnah wa al-adab* ([Event of] Ghadir in the book and tradition and literature) (Fakhr-Rohani 2019). According Fakhr-Rohani (2019), Amini consulted over 100,000 sources, and engaged critically with around 20,000 Sunni sources of criticism to legitimise the event of al-Ghadir in Islamic history (p. 95).

An exhaustive examination of Karbala's history falls outside the scope of this study. Because several accounts already exist, this study does not deal with Karbala in a strictly chronological or historical fashion. As noted, earliest accounts of the events of Ashura can be found in Ibn Sa'd's (d.230AH/845AD) *al-Tabaqāt al-kubrā*. A thorough Persian translation and examination was carried out in 1989 (Tabātabā'i 1989). Moreover, Al-Majilī (1969)'s (d.1111AH/1698AD) depictions of Imam al-Husayn and the Battle of Karbala in *Bihār al-anwār* (Seas of light), crystallised the association of Karbala and Twelver Shi'ism in early Islamic history. There exists a vast amount of Ashura-oriented literature on the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn, known as *maqātāl* literature. Several studies on Ashura have also been conducted. However, these are predominantly written in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Noteworthy examples include Al-Khwārazmī (1948); Al-Athīr (1965); 'Asākir (1995). Hyder (2006) also offers a useful transnational treatment of the Karbala martyrdom narrative and associated rituals. Chronologically Imam al-Husayn's discourses during his journey from Medina to Karbala, Fakhr-Rohani (2013) provides a thorough examination of the events of Ashura by translating, annotating, and situating these written and oral discourses in Shi'i history.

#### *Ashura and the Karbala "Paradigm"*

Western scholarship often limits Ashura to state-centric political examinations. These typically manifest in the context of the Sunni–Shia divide or through employing selective interpretive tropes of "revolutionary" Shi'i resistance against imperialism (Halverson 2010; Corman et al. 2011). Consequently, the Shi'i perspective of Imam al-Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala is insufficiently examined and often depicted in narrow and binary political terms. Amongst the first Western examinations of the relationship between collective Shi'i identity and Karbala was Fischer's (1980) culturally grounded "Karbala paradigm", which introduced the importance of interdependent communications and space. In addition to Fischer, Keddie (1966, 1980, 1981, 1983); Cole (1988); Chelkowski (1979); Ayoub (1978); Pinault (1992) also conducted systematic, foundational studies on identity and rituals in Shi'ism. Describing the hermetic and recursive qualities of the Karbala "paradigm", Fischer (1980, pp. 26–27) notes:

There are, then, three parts to the notion of such paradigm: (a) a story expandable to be all-inclusive of history, cosmology, and life's problems; (b) a background contrast against which the story is given heightened perceptual value; (c) ritual or physical drama to embody the story and maintain high levels of emotional investment: the rituals of daily worship (prayer, purity rules, dietary rules); pilgrimage to the tombs of 'Ali in Najaf, Husayn in Karbala, the other Imams and the hajj; preachments (rawda) mourning (ta'ziya) and passion plays of Muharram (shabih).

Fischer's antiquated paradigm uncovers basic elements of the collective Shi'i identity and Ashura motivation Karbala inspires. Observing high levels of emotional investment during Ashura commemorations, he listed rituals such as prayer, fasting, taziyah (mourning) and Muslim passion plays, as well as pilgrimage to the graves of Imam Ali, al-Husayn and other Imams, and the Hajj (p. 57). Fischer's elicited observations in Karbala offer a glimpse at how sacred spaces and various collective and individual rituals enhance the perceptual value of the Ashura and reproduce collective Shi'i identity. Keddie (1980); Hegland (1983); Gilsenan (1982) sought to further understand the "Karbala Paradigm" at its political dimensions. Utilising dualistic and dichotomous terms of reference such as "accommodation and revolution" (Hegland 1983, p. 12) and "active and passive" (Gilsenan 1982), the paradigmatic project was deeply wedded to the political domain. Subsequent interpretations followed this dichotomous trend (Aghaie 2004; Deeb 2006). Szanto (2013), however, takes issue with the dichotomous treatment of the Karbala Paradigm, arguing that redemptive and revolutionary concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts or interpretations (p. 78). Illuminated by fieldwork observations from Sayyida Zaynab, the sacred Shi'i shrine city 10 km south of Damascus, Szanto (2013) contends that "an analytic focus on affect, rather than political effectiveness, allows scholars to rethink

both ‘revolution’ and ‘salvation’ with regard to contemporary Twelver Shi‘i sm” (p. 79). Moreover, Szanto (2013) finds, in her words, “interpretive differences” concerning the Karbala Paradigm by concentrating on Ashura-oriented symbols, discourses and rituals as contingent and inseparable “modes of affect” during Muharram mourning processions (p. 79). This study’s focus on sacred spaces and places of collective identity accommodates Szanto’s emphasis on affect, ritual, and opposition to political and dichotomous “paradigms” of Karbala.

Saramifar (2020) uses Lacanian realism (Lacan 2016) to offer an anthropology of Shi‘i rituals and symbols, essentialising the Karbala Paradigm’s transient salience among Iranian Shi‘i militia volunteers. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork research conducted in 2017, Saramifar (2020) postulates a “Lacanian intervention to sketch the texture of the lamentations of a subset of Iranians who are committed to the Islamic Revolution” (p. 81). A somewhat obvious issue with this approach is its focus on those professing state-centric politically and religiously motivated violence, precluding the vast majority of peaceful and pious transnational Shi‘i believers with whom the Karbala Paradigm resonates and influences—everyday behaviour.

While systematic, Saramifar’s (2020) association of the “real” and the “Karbala Paradigm” complicates a paradigmatic topic with existing subjective, mystic and spiritual complexities concerning lamentative Shi‘i mourning practices. The study’s gender-inclusive methodology addresses women’s role in lamentation and mourning rituals. However, its implied state-centrism and revolutionism obfuscates the Karbala Paradigm’s transnational elements and ontological universality. Following the speculative ascription of various “reals” that “lurks within the Karbala paradigm”, Saramifar (2020) surmises: “These Reals are authenticated through various ‘modes’ of ineffable’ (Van De Port 2005), such as dreams, visions and what people presume are blessings to arrive at the really Real and confirm their perplexities” (p. 87). While psychodynamically thought-provoking and methodologically thorough, it is not instantly apparent how exactly continental philosophy’s “authentication of the real” clarifies the psychic, attitudinal, and devotional elements of the Karbala Paradigm. This confusion is due to the Karbala Paradigm’s inherent transhistoricity, mystical intersubjectivity, symbolic elusive, and “ineffable” continuous transcendental qualities.

Consequently, the Karbala Paradigm’s open-ended trajectory directs one, on the one hand, to Szanto’s (2013) modalities of affect among pious mourners in Sayyida Zaynab. While on the other hand, Saramifar’s (2020) association of the Karbala Paradigm with authenticated “reals” among Shia militia volunteers indicating a paradigm of interpretive difference with considerably divergent epistemological objectives. As Szanto (2013) advocates, this study looks “beyond the Karbala Paradigm” to conceptualise Karbala’s assemblage of Ashura-oriented spaces. The Ashura Assemblage reproduces a form of collective religious identity in Karbala, which constructs the city as significant in world politics. However, this significance is underexamined primarily due to International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy’s (IPE) scholarly fixation on political dimensions of “global cities”.

Recent studies on the power of cities in International Relations (IR) capture the political dimensions that “global” cities pose in light of globalisation (Acuto 2013a, 2013b; Curtis 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2018; Kangas 2017; Calder 2020). Acuto, Curtis and Kangas’ contributions are crucial to understanding how cities interact with the international system and affect IPE. In addition to studies on governance and global cities, the literature on cities of religious significance is rich (Dumper 2020; Rüpke 2020). Sociologically-grounded anthropological approaches privileging “local understandings”—as opposed to “top-down” assessments—offer deeper understandings into the granularities constructing subject-worthy cities. For example, Dutch scholar J.C Van Van Leur (1955) noted the importance of local understandings in his examination of Asian social and economic history. Seeking to avoid the obstacles symptomatic of the tension between Area Studies and topics stemming from globalisation such as IPE and international security studies (ISS), this study focuses



on the religious urban fabric of Karbala and how Ashura-oriented sacred spaces reproduce collective transnational Shi'i identity. In doing so, it seeks to understand:

How do historical events and geographies of knowledge construct and re-construct conceptions of territoriality, space, place and collective identity?

How do the various methodological units constituting the Ashura Assemblage foster the reproduction collective Shi'i identity?

The Ashura Assemblage uncovers a deeper taxonomy of Husayni rituals and also introduces the variable of Ashura-oriented spaces to any "paradigm" social scientists might seek to impose on the subject of "Karbala" in Shi'i Islam. Any Karbala "paradigm" necessitates the interpretive difference advanced by Szanto (2013). Szanto demonstrates that sound approaches to interpretive difference exist within Shi'i symbolism, practices, rituals and spaces, rather than European theoretical constructs. Szanto (2013) concludes, "instead of focusing on political outcomes, it is more analytically productive to pay closer attention to affect, as it can help us re-think the 'revolutionary' mode of the Karbala Paradigm in broader terms" (p. 88). This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by instituting and focusing on variables of space, place and the reproduction of geographies of knowledge through collective Shi'i identity in Karbala.

### 3. Methodology: Cyberethnography and Religio-Cultural Cartography

Methodologically, this study's cross-disciplinary approach draws on religious historical sociology, digital ethnography, urban heritage geography and architectural design. Using a similar method to appraising the Polish city of Kielce, Gil-Mastalerczyk (2016) offers excellent insight into how religious architecture and cultural heritage shape the urban city fabric. Brennan-Horley et al. (2010) highlight how geographic information system (GIS) technology combined with ethnographic interviews can enhance the communication of urban development results to stakeholders in Darwin, Australia. While this study's cultural cartographic procedure is similar, it uses the Integrated Programming Environment (IPE) extensible drawing editor software package 7.2.24. Using IPE, LaTeX source code was utilised to create, edit, render, and analyse cartographic maps and vector graphics. These maps and graphics were adapted and rendered using multiple layers and primitive geometric objects such as polylines, arcs, spline curves and descriptive text. The apparatus for the vector graphics were tailored to emphasise the sacred spaces central to Karbala's reproduction of collective Shi'i identity. To ensure accuracy, the details and data depicted in the vector graphics were then iteratively refined and verified by custodians of Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine and third-party data repositories. The small sample size of interviewees can be regarded as acceptable, given their unique status and positionality in the history of collective transnational Shi'ism. Depicting and mapping the data across several vector graphics and diagrams required cartographic maps to be rendered using urban geographic data. The research was triangulated using ethnography, secondary sources and open-source databases.

#### *Justification and Procedure*

This study's method of digital ethnography involved a series of structured and semi-structured, synchronous and asynchronous interviews, in addition to textual analysis of a range of primary and secondary Arabic, Persian and English sources. In order to understand the reproduction of collective Shi'i identity in Karbala and to conceptualise the Ashura Assemblage, the research was triangulated through a series of iterative qualitative interviews with six Iraqi and Iranian Shi'i scholars located in the Shi'i shrine cities of Karbala, Najaf and Qom. The respondents represent a unique epistemic community of intellectuals intimately associated with Shi'i shrine cities, occupationally, ideationally and lineally. Various digital platforms were used to conduct interviews, including email, Telegram and WhatsApp. Interviews were mainly conducted in Arabic and transcribed into English, while the remainder were conducted in English. All participants possessed tertiary

university levels of education. Participants' interview consent was obtained in all cases, and follow-up quotation attributions were confirmed using the platforms mentioned above.

Interviews varied in duration and frequency, as did sampling questions and their snowballing trajectories. Data were collected, iteratively refined and clarified through several follow-up informal interviews. This study was feasible due to the small sample size. Sketched provided by, and conversations with - religio-pragmatics pioneer expert Muhammad-Reza Fakhri-Rohani, and assistance from the Office of the holy shrine of Imam al-Husayn were foundational to this study's novel phenomenological approach and contribution. Interviews were qualitative and open-ended in nature. The total length of this cyber-ethnographic approach involved approximately 100 h of interviews. The majority of these interviews commenced informally leading up to the holy month of Muharram in 2021 (August–September). Formal interviews were conducted throughout September and October 2021. Indicative sample questions began by understanding the religious urban fabric of Karbala through architectural representation. Follow-up questions concentrated on issues related to territoriality, the importance of Ashura, and how sacred spaces evoke and inspire collective identity and memory. Interview questions were uniquely designed to suit the respondents' area of expertise. For example, while all respondents were Shi'i intellectuals, one was an expert on Ashura-oriented religio-pragmatics professor while another was an expert on Karbala's cultural heritage and architecture. This justifies the cross-disciplinary approach and explains the diversity of results and findings.

It should be noted that quantifying diversity between respondents on grounds such as nationality, gender, or level of education was mainly deemed irrelevant and unilluminating to this study's aims. Given the qualitative and cross-disciplinary approach, participants were treated as experts of their own experiences rather than comparative ethnographic subjects. Illuminations of the power of place and geographies of knowledge complemented these unique local understandings.

#### 4. Theory: Geographies of Knowledge and the Politics of Place and Space

Due to the complex historical and cultural relationship between land, textuality, authority and pilgrimage, this study conceptualises Karbala's sacred construction of place and geography of religious knowledge using analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010). None of these factors can be studied in isolation from others and precede modern state and pre-modern nation-state formations. Collectively, these factors foster a unique form of religious transnationalism, whereby the power of place and ritual in Karbala reproduce collective Shi'i identity. Mead (1934) proposed an "open-ended ontology" for analytic eclecticism which included "structurationism, social theory, rational-choice approaches as well as constructivist approaches stressing the process and significance of collective identity formation in international arenas" (Sil and Katzenstein 2010, p. 417). In their words, analytic eclecticism: requires a broad understanding of the relative strengths and trade-offs of different methods and an openness to considering causal stories presented in different forms by scholars employing different methods. The combinatorial logic of analytic eclecticism depends not on the multiplicity of methods but on the multiplicity of connections between the different mechanisms and social processes analysed in isolation in separate research traditions (p. 415).

Analytic eclecticism is necessary partly due to the epistemological and ontological tensions between Area Studies approaches and globalisation. The nation-state is the primary actor and analytic unit in studies on politics of space and, by extension, geographies of knowledge. The geographic unit of the "nation-state" and its prevalence in Area Studies detracts from how geographic units and localities are shaped by social life and interactions, giving power and meaning to place.

##### 4.1. Geographies of Knowledge and Local Understandings

The literature on the power of cultural landscapes is vast (Wissler 1923; Benedict 1934; White 1949; Kroeber 1952; Giedion 1954; Geertz 1973, 1983; Tuan 1977; Van Der Lann and

Piersma 1982; Carter 1983; Pred 1983, 1984; Cosgrove 1984; Rodman 1985; Agnew and Duncan 1989; Schama 1995; Baker and Biger 1992; Radding 2005; Kratoska et al. 2005; Sutherland 2005; Lefebvre 2012). However, privileging the nation-state as the analytic unit of cultural landscapes limits the discipline's potential pathways. Describing the "political-bureaucratic" perspective that sees the state as the fundamental unit of analysis, Subrahmanyam (1999) persuasively argues:

It is as if these conventional geographical units of analysis, fortuitously defined as givens for the intellectually slothful, and the result of complex (even murky) processes of academic and non-academic engagement, somehow become real and overwhelming. Having helped to create these Frankenstein monsters, we are obliged to praise them for their beauty, rather than grudgingly acknowledge their limited functional utility (p. 742).

Subrahmanyam's sharp observations capture the way in which state-centrism minimises the importance of "local understandings" in Area Studies. Central to notions of place-making in Area Studies are local understandings. As Geertz (1983) established, local understandings are essential to informed studies on geographies of knowledge because the granularities that form society's fabric cannot be captured using taxonomical state-centric approaches. Wolf (1982) postulated that Area Studies, in search of "local understandings", led researchers to overlook connections and unequal power relationships extending beyond regions. However, Daniels (1989) supported the notion that local understandings help understand how landscapes act as both a "way of life" and a "way of seeing" (p. 424). Following this constructionist strand, Rogers (1992) makes the case that people actively shape the historical contingency of the making of place. He argues that place-making is situated in specific time-space contexts, in which all social life is "regionalised and regionalizing". Agnew and Duncan (1989), meanwhile, interrogate the polysemic meanings of the word "place" in the lexicon of geography. Their understanding views "place" as both concrete and expressive. From this perspective, the authors argue that "Places provided both the real, concrete settings from which cultures emanated to enmesh people in webs of activities and meanings and the physical expression of those cultures in the form of landscapes" (p. vii). Physical expressions of cultures construct and reconstruct geographic landscapes. Consequently, local understandings cannot be discounted or ignored in Area Studies.

As a discipline, Area Studies is based on two primary maxims: (a) regions with common characteristics could be identified and examined collectively, and (b) such regions should be studied "from within" on the basis of detailed local knowledge (Kratoska et al. 2005, p. 6). An essential critique of traditional Area Studies is its treatment of geographic entities as fixed categories. Sutherland (2005) rejects this essentialist approach, arguing instead that geographic entities are better viewed as "contingent devices" rather than fixed categories (pp. 20–49). Sutherland's approach views locality as paramount in understanding geographies of knowledge. Pemberton's (1994) *On the Subject of Java* offers a thorough examination of the construction and reconstruction of place and cultural landscape. Pemberton's (1994) study is related to Weismann et al.'s (2014) compelling examination of Islam and globalisation and how myths and memories foster collective identity and belonging to place. This notion of myths, memories and collective identity is reminiscent of Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities*. Discarding the disciplinary baggage of the "nation-state", this study differs from Weismann et al. (2014) by examining the granularities that capture the customs, traditions, rituals, and assemblage of spaces reproducing collective identity in Karbala. In this sense, this study's focus on place, space and collective identity in Karbala and the connecting theme of Islam is somewhat similar to Pemberton's (1994) treatment of Java. However, Karbala's unique assemblage of Ashura-oriented spaces is primarily constructed by the power of place.

#### 4.2. The Power of Place and Space in Karbala

In the context of the 9th and 10th-century Islamic world, Antrim (2012) writes, "The discourse of place includes works that have been classified separately as world and regional geographies, literary anthologies, topographical histories, religious treatises, travelogues

and poems” (p. 3). Antrim uses this framework to describe the unique nature of “extratextual performances” in cities through cognitive, oral and physical acts “prompted by a text” (p. 3). Karbala exemplifies this city-specific phenomenon of “extratextual performance” through Ashura-oriented performative rituals, including pilgrimage, poetry, and Ashura-oriented objects used during physical acts at sacred spaces. The resulting data synthetically link sacred spaces and collective memory with Karbala’s cultural landscape. The anatomy of Karbala’s sacred sanctuary can therefore be posed in terms of space, memory and collective identity. This particular approach was chosen in light of local understandings, primary sources and data derived from interviews. The approach is geared towards a cross-disciplinary understanding of Karbala, which gives weight to the significant granularities of the Ashura events, contributing to the city’s assemblage of sites that reproduce collective transnational Shi’i identity. The cross-disciplinary approach bears a close resemblance to [Antrim’s \(2012\)](#) study on the power of place in the early Islamic world. This study uses a variation of Antrim’s procedure with the added variable of sacred places and sites. Specifically, it traces the construction of Karbala and the reproduction of collective Shi’i identity to demonstrate the power of place through Ashura-oriented rituals and spaces. The approach is adapted to account for local understandings and geo-culturally contextual factors.

## 5. The Anatomy of Karbala as a Pilgrimage City

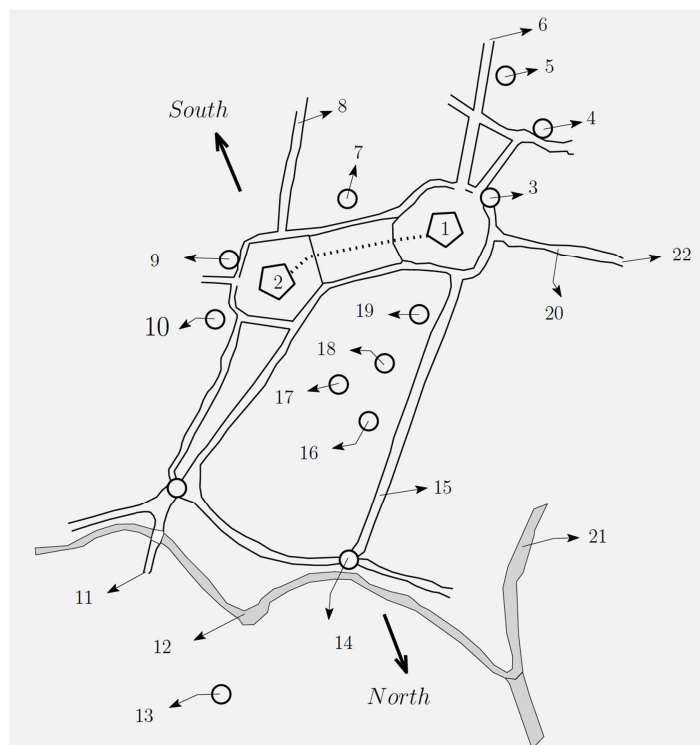
### 5.1. Infallibility and the Eternal Sanctity of Karbala

The Prophet Muhammad and subsequent Infallible Imams first asserted the eternal sanctity of Karbala. The concept of Infallibility is significant in Shi’i Islam. It is not a status attained through personal piety. Rather, it is a divinely-granted privilege. While all humans are fallible, in Shi’i Islam, closeness to the Infallibles such as Imam al-Husayn brings one closer to God. Karbala is unique in containing both first- and second-rate shrine-mosques and several tomb-free sacred spaces. Geographically, Karbala gains divine status by housing the fifth infallible shrine—Imam al-Husayn. Within Imam al-Husayn’s holy shrine, the holiest place is the precise location where he is buried. While still contributing to the reproduction of collective Shi’i identity, all other places are epiphenomenal in status and secondary nature. Although Al-Abbas was not an Infallible personality, in Shi’i memory and scholarship, he is uniquely regarded as above all other people. This is because he was raised in the house of Imam Ali, and his two elder brothers were Imam Hasan and Imam al-Husayn. It is for this reason that no one is comparable with Al-Abbas in Shi’i Islam (Interview with Iranian religio-pragmatics professor, 26 September 2021). While central to Ashura and collective Shi’i identity, he does not match his elder brother Imam al-Husayn because he was the Infallible Imam. As [Al-Qazwini \(1999\)](#) argues, “The power of infallibility or without sin does not make a person incapable of committing sins, rather he/she refrains from sins and mistakes by his/her own power and will”. Karbala is unique because it is a shrine city containing collective martyrs and multiple venerable dignitaries, both Infallible and non-Infallible. On the one hand, Karbala is distinct because Infallible shrines rank higher than shrines of non-Infallibles, and distinction must therefore be made between first- and second-rate shrines. On the other hand, Karbala’s urban fabric and broader cultural landscape serve as an intrinsic reminder of Ashura.

Karbala is exceptional in that the exact spaces and sites of Ashura events and peoples are contained within and around the holy sanctuary of Imam al-Husayn. There exist over ten significant places in Karbala related in one way or another to Imam Husayn or al-Abbas and the Ashura martyrdom story. These constitute a cultural landscape of Karbala as a sacred city representing and reproducing collective identity through sacred spaces, rituals and collective memory. In addition, major and minor pilgrimage places and sacred spaces construct the city of Karbala as a sacred site of collective transnational Shi’i identity. [Figure 1](#) offers a macro-level illustration of Karbala’s urban geography and the myriad sacred spaces central to the Ashura martyrdom narrative. The table in [Figure 2](#) lists these sacred spaces. Each of these spaces in Karbala contributes to the reproduction of



collective identity based on the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn. The following sections depict various meso-level conceptualisations of these localities and critically examines their significance to collective transnational Shi‘i identity due to the events of Ashura.



**Figure 1.** The Ashura Assemblage: Karbala’s Major and Minor Pilgrimage Spaces and Places. Source: Original source rendered from sketch provided by Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, 2021.

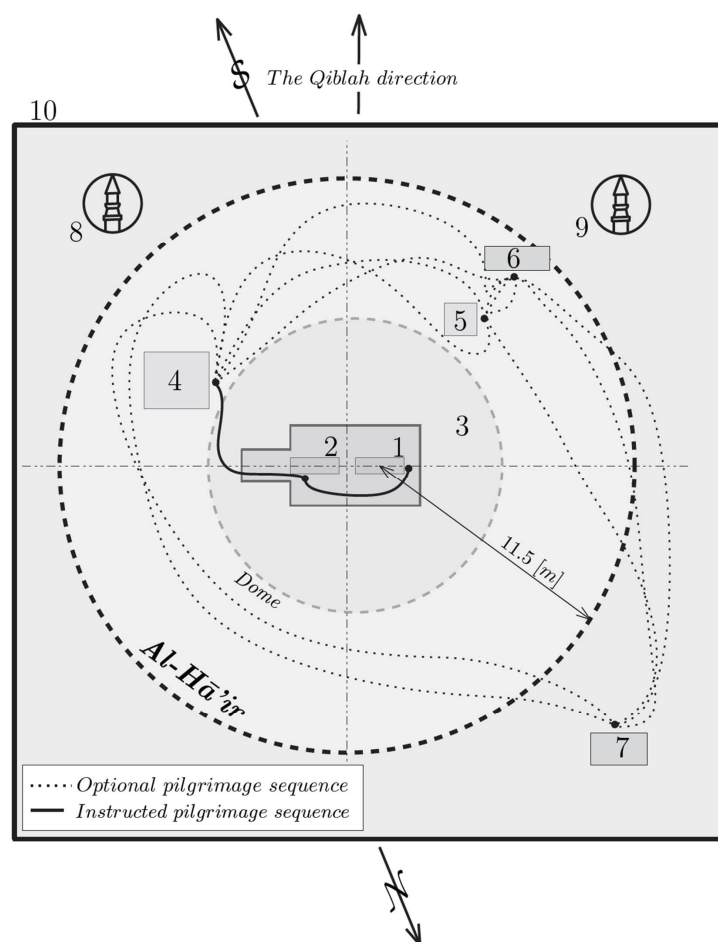
1. Imam al-Husayn holy shrine	11. Road towards Baghdad
2. Al-‘Abbās’s holy shrine	12. Al-Husaynīyyah Brook
3. Lady Zaynab’s Hillock	13. Imam Ja’far al-Sādiq’s maqām
4. Imam al-Husayn’s Encampment	14. Imam al-Mahdi maqām
5. The Tomb of Ahmad b. Fahd al Hilli	15. Al-Sidrah Street
6. Imam al-Husayn’s Qiblah Avenue	16. Meeting place of Imam al-Husayn & Umayyad general ‘Umar b. Said
7. Lady Fiddah’s maqām (spot)	17. Imam Mūsā b. Ja’far’s maqām
8. Al ‘Abbās Qiblah Avenue	18. Alī al-Akbar’s maqām
9. Al ‘Abbās’s left hand maqām (spot)	19. ‘Ali al-Asghar’s maqām
10. Al ‘Abbās’s right hand maqām (spot)	20. Al-Shuhadā (Martyrs) Street
	21. Al-Hindiyyah Brook
	22. The direction of the tomb of al-Hurr (West of Karbala)

**Figure 2.** Sacred Spaces and Places Illustrated in Figure 2. Source: Information informing sketch by Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani provided by the office of the Holy Shrine of Imam al-Husayn 2021.

### 5.2. Imam al-Husayn's Holy Sanctuary

The main building of Imam Al-Husayn's holy sanctuary and its several consecrated spots symbolise a sacred core within a broader peripheral concentric sacred space. This holy sanctuary contains several cultural objects and collective tombs of Ashura martyrs, which, one can argue, fosters collective Shi'i identity. Multiple spots within the core and periphery of the shrine contribute to the space's sacredness in Shi'i Islam and its attractiveness as a site of pilgrimage and ritual. Each spot implies distinct meaning and evokes distinct memories related to the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn in Karbala.

Figure 3 depicts the main building of Imam Al-Husayn's holy sanctuary and its numerous sacred spaces. This holy sanctuary contains several cultural objects and collective tombs of Ashura martyrs, fostering collective identity. Several features within the core and periphery of the shrine contribute to the space's sacredness in Shi'i Islam. Each nodal feature represents a distinct meaning and distinct memories related to the Karbala martyrdom narrative. Point 1 is the sacred core and centre of the broader holy sanctuary and the whole city: Imam al-Husayn's tomb. Point 2 is the tomb of Imam al-Husayn's elder son 'Alī al-Akbar ('Alī the Elder/Junior). 'Alī al-Akbar is buried at the feet of Imam al-Husayn within the same grating (point 3). Point 3 encompasses the metal grating, which covers the area beneath the sacred grating of Imam al-Husayn. Just outside the sacred grating, approximately four metres from the feet of 'Alī al-Akbar's tomb, is the tomb of the collective martyrs (point 4). This collective tomb contains the bodies of several martyrs who died on the Day of Ashura with Imam al-Husayn.



**Figure 3.** Concentric and other peripheral sacred places and spaces at Imam al-Husayn's Holy Shrine in Karbala. Source: Original Graphic. Rendered from sketch and conversation with Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, 2021.

### 5.3. The Ziarat Sequence within Imam al-Husayn's Shrine

Islamic instruction asserts that pilgrims start the pilgrimage by paying *ziarat* (pilgrimage) to Imam al-Husayn, then to Ali al-Akbar, and then the Ashura martyrs. This sequence from 1 to 2 and then 4 is regarded as the instructed pilgrimage sequence. However, points of departure from 4 to 6–9 are optional pathways of visitation (Interview Iranian-based religio-pragmatics expert 26 September 2021). This sequence implies that while points 1–4 represent instructed pilgrimage, points 6–9 reflect potential pathways connecting the pilgrimage between sacred cores and peripheral sacred spaces. Collectively, the pilgrimage sequence within Imam Al-Husayn's holy sanctuary demonstrates one instance where Karbala reproduces collective identity through the memorialisation of Ashura-oriented spaces.

Imam al-Husayn's tomb is the sacred core and centre of the holy shrine sanctuary and the entire city of Karbala (Point 1). Outside the sacred core, approximately four metres from the feet of 'Alī al-Akbar's tomb, is the tomb of the collective martyrs (point 4). The collective tomb contains the bodies of several martyrs who died on the Day of Ashura with Imam al-Husayn. Located just outside the sacred grating and dome of Imam al-Husayn is the tomb of Habīb b. Muzāhir al-Asadi (point 5). al-Asadi was a close aged companion of Imam Ali and one of the most elderly Ashura martyrs. Typically, pilgrims visiting Imam al-Husayn's sacred sanctuary will first offer salaams (salutations) to Imam al-Husayn and his martyred elder son, 'Alī al-Akbar, and then to the collective tomb of Ashura martyrs. After this, they will visit the tomb and burial chamber of the aged Ashura martyr Habib b. Muzahir al-Asadi, and then turn to Sayyid Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb (point 6). Next to al-Asadi's tomb is the burial chamber of Ibrāhīm al-Mujāb, grandson of the seventh Infallible Imam Mūsā al-Kāẓim. The photograph in Figure 4 from inside the sacred sanctuary captures the distance of 4.5 m between the tomb of 'Alī al-Akbar and the collective tomb of martyrs.



**Figure 4.** Tomb and grating of the elderly martyr, Habib b. Muzahir al-Asadi. To the right is the grating of Imam al-Husayn, with the narrower grating for his martyred son. To the left is the collective tomb and grating of the Ashura martyrs, with their names inscribed over the metal grating. Source: “Photo Gallery”, ImamHussain.org (n.d.) <https://pic.imamhussain.org/gallery/show/1093> accessed on 1 October 2021.

Generations of Ibrahim al-Mujab's descendants took charge of the protection and administration of Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine. Many Shi'i believe that the Infallibles hear their salaams and answer their salaams; however, the Imams cannot hear their voice. It is said that Ibrahim al-Mujab and many other mystics heard the voice of Imam al-

Husayn from inside his burial sepulchre (Interview with Shi'i intellectual, September 2021). Descendent of al-Mujab and son of famous Karbala historian Sayyid Salmaan, Salmaan Aal To'mah recounted that his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and ancestors discharged their services to Imam al-Husayn's holy sanctuary (Interview with Dr Ahmad Salmaan Aal To'mah, 5 October 2021). Tu'mah carried out foundational studies on tribes and families in Karbala and Karbala in Shi'i memory (Tu'mah 1988, 1998). To'mah's scholarly and lineal associations to the shrine helped establish himself as a reputable scholar in the Shi'i world. Qualifying the influence of Salmaan Tu'mah, an Iranian-based religio-pragmatics expert said, "In the world of Husayni scholarship, when there is a reference to the books of Dr. Sayyid Salmaan Aal Tu'mah, it means the end of research and scholarship in the field. He is the ultimate say" (Interview, 26 September 2021). This highlights the historical construction of collective Shi'i identity in Karbala as linking occupation, scholarship and lineage.

The Alid council constructed the easterly and westerly minarets in 280 AH/893 AD. They were designed to be on either side of the sacred cores, facing the direction of the Qiblah. In 780/1384, the two minarets were reconstructed of gold by Sultan Ahmad ibn 'Uways. The importance of the direction of the Qiblah as it relates to Shi'i ritual is noteworthy. The Qiblah is the direction towards the Kaaba inside the sacred Mosque in Mecca, located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The direction of the Qiblah in mosques and shrines is significant during pilgrimage ritualisation. Corpses are buried on their right shoulders such that they are facing the Qiblah. When paying pilgrimage to Imam al-Husayn or other dignitaries, Islamic instruction asserts that pilgrims stand facing the tomb and when the Qiblah falls behind them as if they are paying salaam to a living person. In 1360 AH/1941 AD, Dr Syed Taher Saifuddin contributed to reconstructing the westerly minaret with a considerable amount of gold plating its structure. The following section discusses the significance of the al-Hā'ir sacred zone.

#### 5.4. The Hā'ir Sacred Zone within Imam al-Husayn's Holy Sanctuary

All the aforementioned focal points are contained within the concentric circle al-Hā'ir sacred zone, which contains the sacred core of Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine, and encompasses the broader periphery of the holy sanctuary. It is an unmarked area of approximately 11.5 m in all directions from Imam al-Husayn's tomb. Due to its spatial sacredness, travelling pilgrims can perform three- and four- rak'at (prostration) mandatory salats (prayer facing the Qiblah) either in a complete or shortened form inside. The al-Hā'ir implies that no traveller is counted as a stranger because the radius is the home of all believers (Unpublished note by Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, 26 September 2021). Located outside the al-Hā'ir sacred zone is the Qatligāh (sacrificing place), the exact martyrdom spot where Shimr beheaded Imam al-Husayn on Ashura. The Qatligāh has a gate from inside the shrine that is occasionally open to the pilgrims. In recent years, a window was installed from the outer wall, near the foot of the westerly minaret, in the courtyard through which pilgrims witness and experience what is considered the most tragic spot in the sequence of events commemorated at Ashura. Having established the ziarat sequence and Ashura-related sites within Imam al-Husayn's Holy Sanctuary, the following section outlines the sacralised spaces in Karbala's broader pilgrimage locus.

### 6. Sacralised Places and Cultural Cartographic Places

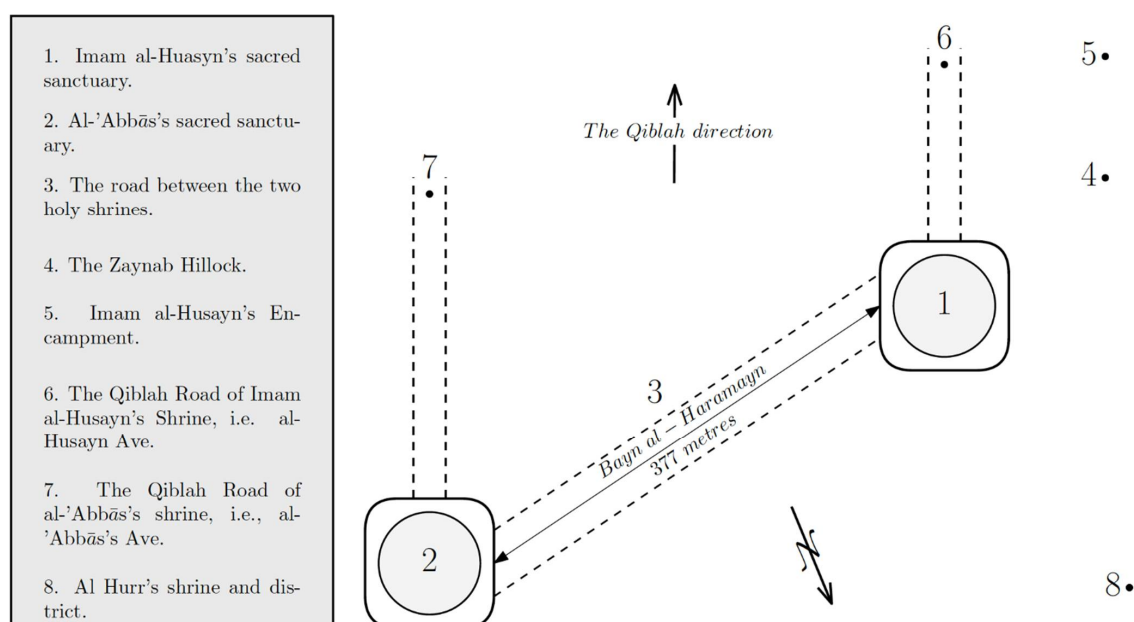
Cultural cartographic plans highlight how Karbala's main pilgrimage promenade links Imam al-Husayn's holy sanctuary with several other Ashura-oriented sites of collective Shi'i identity. Connecting the shrines of Imam al-Husayn and his younger half-brother al-'Abbās is a pathway or thoroughfare known as the 'Bayn al-Haramayn' (Between the two shrines). Between 1973 and 1987, Iraq's Endowment Ministry undertook administration of the holy shrines. In 1979, buildings, historical monuments, seminaries and mosques were demolished, creating a new open space for the 'Bayn al-Haramayn'. After the 1991



Karbala uprisings, most of the buildings adjacent to the shrines were reduced to rubble (Happold 2003).

### *The 'Bayn al-Haramayn'*

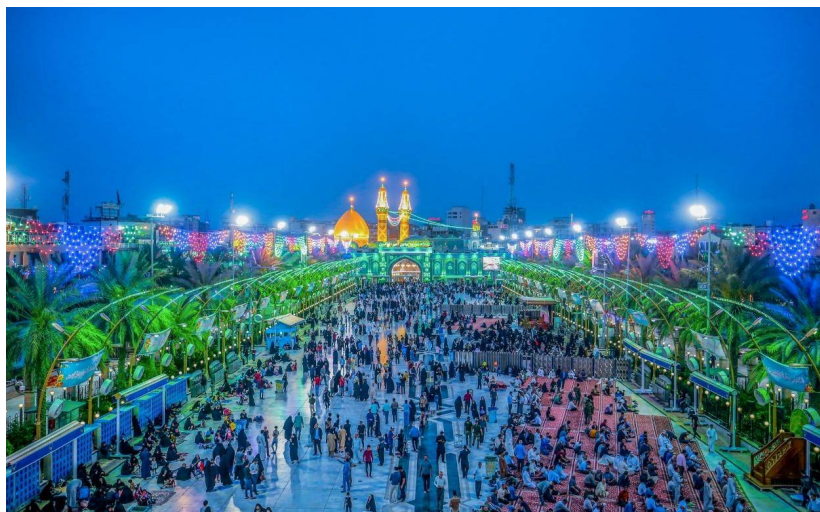
In 1997, the city council laid the street with cement and planted palm trees along the two sides of the road. Palm trees symbolise Mesopotamia and allude to an Arab region (Figure 6). This initiative by then-President Saddam Hussein was carried out to minimise Persian-Shi'i identity in Karbala (Interview with Karbala-based Shi'i intellectual, 26 September 2021). Meanwhile, in 1997, at the University of Wales, Raouf Al-Ansari developed his doctoral dissertation on the architectural development of Karbala. Ansari's concluding chapter: "Proposals and Redevelopment", notes, "The inherent relationship between the two holy shrines and the surrounding area appears to be active and in continuous interaction. Thus, if the livelihood of the area between and around the two holy shrines is derived from its relationship with the shrines, then the whole city of Karbala would be lively as a result of its relationship to the city centre" (Al-Ansari 1997, p. 266). Ansari's dissertation later formed the blueprint for the "Karbala holy city model", which emphasised Karbala's "urban fabric, especially the areas around the two thresholds" (Al-Ansari 1997, p. 230). While in Wales, Ansari's doctoral research on Karbala religious urban geography gained attention and was published in transnational Arab newspapers and magazines such as Al-Hayat (Al-Hayat, November 1998, p. 16). Following its reconstruction after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, The Bayn al-Haramayn' promenade became a sacralised space because of its architectural aesthetics, urban infrastructural development and location between the two shrines. The expansive promenade is 377 m in length and is said to be one of the exact places where the fighting in the Battle of Karbala took place (Zumayazim 2011). Figure 5 provides a cultural cartographic depiction of the Bayn-al Haramayn in relation to other Ashura-oriented spaces.



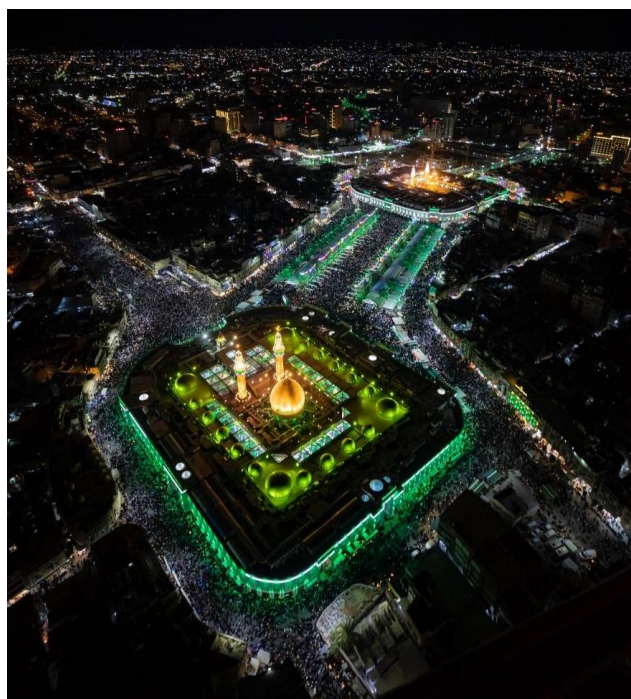
**Figure 5.** A Plan of the Main Pilgrimage Sites in Karbala. Source: Original graphic adapted from sketch provided by Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, 2021.

Dr Raouf Al-Ansari was a key architect of the redevelopment of Karbala as a holy city after the 2003 invasion. The Iraqi government initiated new programs to expand religious sites in Karbala designed to attract pilgrims and facilitate a pedestrian space between the two shrines. For the convenience of pilgrims, shops, marketplaces and other spaces were constructed on either side. At the request of the representatives of the supreme authority in

Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Dr Al-Ansari presented his design proposals for the development of Karbala and Najaf free of charge. By 2013, the area's pathway was paved with Italian marble, and several infrastructural developments were made to modernise the area. Later, Al-Ansari (2016) completed an updated examination of the civilisation and history of Karbala. Figures 6 and 7 depict the modernised Bayn al-Haramayn from street and aerial viewpoints. Having established Karbala's main pilgrimage promenade's geography, the following sections outline poetically prescribed spaces and rituals associated with the Ashura Assemblage.



**Figure 6.** The Modernised Bayn al-Haramayn' Pedestrian. Source: "Photo Gallery", ImamHussain.org—(n.d.) <https://pic.imamhussain.org/gallery/show/16149> accessed on 1 October 2021.



**Figure 7.** Aerial view of Bayn al-Haramayn pedestrian during Ashura at night. Source: "Photo Gallery", ImamHussain.org—(n.d.) <https://pic.imamhussain.org/gallery/show/16175> accessed on 1 October 2021.

## 7. Poetically Prescribed Spaces of Ritual

In Shi'i ritual, specific spaces are considered sacred. While these places can be regarded as second-rate pilgrimage places, they contribute to the reproduction of collective Shi'i identity. Thus, Karbala represents a form of manifold collective identity. However, some distinctions must be made between rituals and objects and objects related to those rituals. This distinction can be made by dividing Husayni rituals into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary rituals refer to those explicitly explicated in Shi'i religious texts. Such rituals are regarded as primary or main rituals. In her seminal text, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Bell (1997, 2009) proposed "a more holistic and pragmatic orientation to multiple dimensions of the phenomenon of ritual" (Bell 1997, p. ix). However, a distinction was not made distinctions between primary and peripheral rituals. In the context of Shi'ite rituals, secondary rituals are those which have developed through the centuries but do not explicitly mention in primacy texts. These may be regarded as secondary or ephemeral sacred texts.

When classifying and categorising institutions of collective identity such as poetically ritualised places, spaces and spots, the salience of such practices is essential to understanding them in a sophisticated and accurate manner. In Karbala, two noteworthy examples exist. The first is the place where al-Abbās' right hand was cut off (Figure 8). The second is the place where al-Abbās' left hand was severed on the Day of Ashura. These places are called *maqāms*. They are located on the north side but somewhat on the left and the right sides of al-'Abbās's sacred sanctuary. In Persian, *maqām* means "status, ranking, position, situation". In Arabic, it means the same with additional meanings of "place, location" as well as those mentioned in the case of Persian (Fakhr-Rohani 2019, p. 51). Figure 8 depicts the *maqām* of 'Abbās' right hand in Karbala.



**Figure 8.** The *maqām* of 'Abbās' right hand in Karbala. Source: Sepideh Parapajouh, "The Topography of Corporal Relics in Twelver Shi'ism: Some Anthropological Reflections on the Places of Ziyāra", *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World*, 1 (Parapajouh 2020): 199–225 at p. 215. accessed on 1 October 2021.

Another example of a prescribed ritual spot is where Imam al-Husayn met the Umayyad general and army commander, 'Umar b. Sa'd, on the eve of Ashura. At this spot, Imam al-Husayn tried to dissuade the Umayyad general not to wage war on the ensuing day. Rituals can be distinguished by the degree to which they are regarded as first-rate or essential, in contrast to second-rate, additional, peripheral or supplementary rituals. One such example is the controversial Ashura ritual of *taṭbīr* (self-flagellation), a second-rate ritual practised fervently in Karbala and occasionally in Najaf. *Taṭbīr* is a bloodletting mourning ritual where mourners beat their heads with *qama* (daggers), yelling "Hayder,



Hayder” while drums and horns are played. Islamic musical instrumentals such as drums and trumpets have been used since the early 20th century, and the phrase refers to Imam Ali, Imam al-Husayn’s father (Nakash 1993). Although *Taṭbīr* has not been part of Husayni rituals in any primary texts, some people have come to endorse it as a primary, first-rate ritual. However, a vast majority of Shi’is reject the practice outright. Several other focal points in the above figures relevant to Karbala’s reproduction of collective identity require elaboration, such as the Zaynab Hillock.

### 7.1. The Zaynab Hillock

The Zaynab Hillock was a small hill near the Karbala battlefield. It is said Imam al-Husayn’s sister, Zaynab climbed the hill to gain a vantage point to monitor the battles between Imam al-Husayn and his enemies. Some Arabic translations of the space call it “Zainabiya Hill”. Al-Sawaf (n.d.) writes,

Zainabiyya Hill is a name given to one of the shrines built near the shrine of Imam Hussein (peace be upon him) on a high place similar to a hill, where the center of the building is a dome covered with the magnificent Karbalai Kashi. Kāshī [Kāshī is a Persian word which means ceramic tile], and the outer walls are covered with Turkish marble, and from the inside with beautiful ceramic mirror.

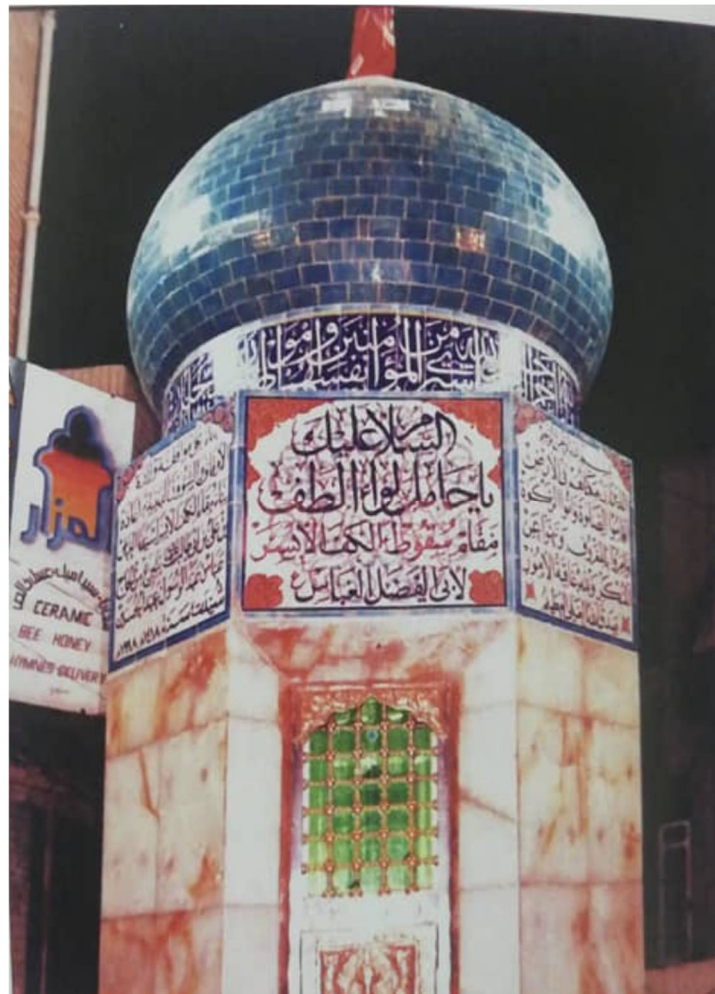
Objectively speaking, the Zaynab Hillock is not a large hill by any means, rather a slightly elevated piece of ground. The main spot of the Karbala battlefield was somewhat lower than its surrounding parts. It remains this way because while entering Imam al-Husayn’s sacred sanctuary, there are either some sloping passages or stairs because the tomb is situated lower than the street surface. The Zaynab Hillock is near the *Qiblah*-side or southern outer walls of Imam al-Husayn’s sacred sanctuary. It is located on the other side of the street that runs around Imam al-Husayn’s sacred sanctuary (Interview with Iranian religio-pragmatics professor, 26 September 2021). A small mosque was later built in the same elevated place to mark Zaynab’s presence and sufferings at this space. Thus, the Zaynab Hillock has become a symbolic memorial of the original hillock during the events of Ashura. One participant for this study referred to Zaynab as the “mountain of patience” (Interview with Karbala based Shi’i intellectual, 26 September 2021). Emphasising Zaynab’s centrality to Ashura, he asserted, “She proves definitely that she is stronger than everyone and everything. Unless she was present in the Battle and after it, much would have been unknown” (Interview with Karbala based Shi’i intellectual, 25 September 2021). In Shi’i Islam, Zaynab is revered as a figure of divine courage and strength because of her role in Ashura and subsequent captivity in Damascus at the Mamluk court. Figure 7 depicts the current Zaynab Hillock Mosque where lady Zaynab stood and wept out to her brother Imam al-Husayn after Ibn Ziyad’s army attacked their encampment. The “Hill” underwent thorough renovations in 2004 with the addition of interior marble walls and pure silver net. Figure 9 depicts the renovated mosque located at the Zaynab Hillock.

The current mosque is donned with green ornaments and banners. In Shi’i Islam, green symbolises purity, fertility and peace. The dome on the mosque has distinct blue tiling. In Shi’ism, blue symbolises water, tranquillity, heaven, peace of mind, and peacefulness. The marble and grating beneath it are textured with red and white colours. The red, white and blue combination represents a unique contrast. In Shi’ism, white symbolises innocence, peace, perfection and purity of the soul, while red symbolises blood and the continual revolution of Ashura and enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt (Interview with Iranian religio-pragmatics professor, 26 September 2021). In some ways, the Zaynab Hillock dome represents an architectural contrast between good and evil. The circular blue dome represents tranquillity and peacefulness. As in many other faiths, Shi’ism views the circle to be a perfect geometrical shape. The circle represents perfection, sublimity, devoid imperfection and all-inclusivity. For these reasons, the base of domes always takes the form of a circle. Figure 10 captures this contrast between good and evil. In addition to the Zaynab Hillock, a similarly prescribed sacred space in Karbala is Imam al-Husayn’s encampment.





**Figure 9.** Source: “Al-Zaynabee Hill”, Imam Hussain Holy Shrine (20 May 2018) <https://imamhussain.org/english/karbala/18071> accessed on 1 October 2021.



**Figure 10.** A Contrast between good and evil: The Zaynab Hillock Dome. Source: Alavi (2010).

### 7.2. Imam al-Husayn's Encampment and Al-Hurr

Karbala's reproduction of collective Shi'i identity is not solely due to the shrine of Imam al-Husayn. It is not one site, with one spiritual meaning, nor one tomb within the site but rather a complex assemblage of sites which, taken together, reproduce ritualised collective identity. Several loci of ritualised sacred spaces contribute to the reproduction of collective identity. One such locus of ritualised collective identity is Imam Husayn's encampment. Pragmatically, "encampment" refers to the location of a camp at a specific time. Accordingly, Imam Husayn's 'encampment' location during the events of Ashura does not precisely match the current place where his presence is sacralised. Although Husayn's encampment does not match the location of Imam Husayn's holy shrine, it remains a sacralised space of poetically prescribed ritual. The modern edifice symbolises Imam al-Husayn's historical "encampment" before the Battle of Karbala. Figure 11 depicts the current camp of Imam al-Husayn's "encampment". The Camp has two large blue-green domes situated above the position of the tents Imam al-Husayn and his followers resided in after arriving from Medina.



**Figure 11.** Source: "The Camp of Imam Hussain", *Imam Hussain Holy Shrine* (20 May 2018). <https://imamhussain.org/english/karbala/18070>. accessed on 1 October 2021.

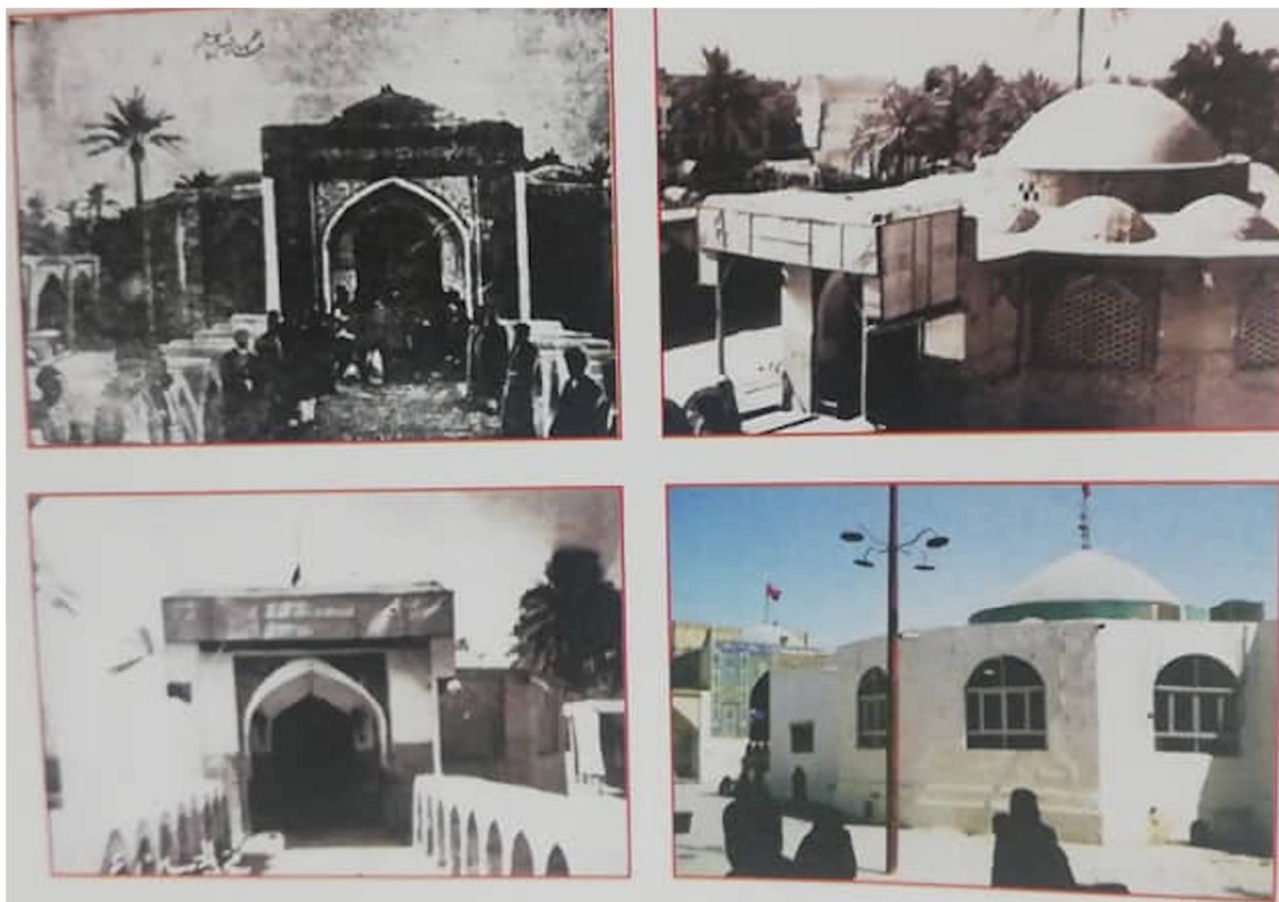
Many prominent Najafi clerics believe that the place which is regarded as the place of Imam Husayn's encampment is simply a symbolic place representing a much larger area, diminishing the historical accuracy of the "real life" encampment site. Several Najafi scholars concur, agreeing that Imam Husayn's encampment was, in reality, vast. According to an Iranian-based religio-pragmatics expert (September 2021) the size of the encampment in Karbala, he recalled:

Based on sound historical research, Ayatollah Sayyid Husayn al-Mousawi Abu Sa'idah of Najaf, believes that the area chosen for the encampment was really very vast, spanning in a crescent-shape area from the present place through to near the tomb of al-Hurr to the west of the city of Karbala. The same place was later chosen as a mosque, simply because it is believed that Imam al-Husayn and other prominent martyrs stayed there for approximately nine days.



Antrim's (2012, pp. 13–14) “lexicon of territoriality” clarifies some confusion regarding Imam al-Husayn's encampment. Discussing various terms of lexical territoriality, including *manzāzil* (encampment, dwelling), Antrim writes, “Although these words all connote some form of territoriality, they do not necessarily imply immobility or a settled life; a manzil might be a moveable tentlike dwelling, but for the duration of its use it is rooted in the earth” (p. 14). Through this reading, it becomes clear al-Husayn's exact encampment was an ephemeral place in 680AD and is therefore virtually impossible to ascertain topographically. The exact spot of Imam al-Husayn's encampment in Karbala resembled a much broader crescent-shaped area than what has come to be represented near Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine. Notions of territoriality as places in time are abundant. Wright (1947) argues, for instance, that constructed spaces are never confined to the present or concrete but rather encompass spaces of past experiences and memories that reside in the imagination, known as ‘geosophies’. Similarly, Pred (1984) argues that place might be thought of as a “process of becoming” (p. 287).

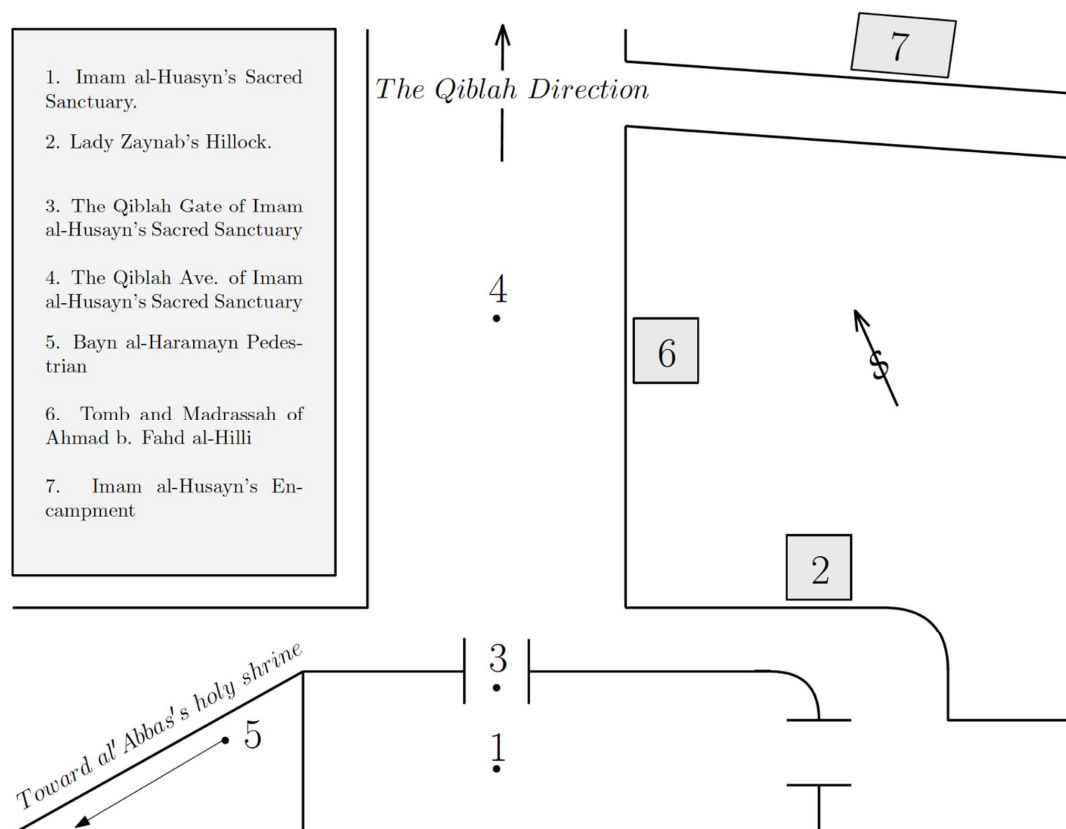
Imam al-Husayn's encampment harboured his partisans and those who abandoned the Umayyads in the hours leading up to the events of Ashura. The current mosque, known as al-Mukhayyam al Husayni in Arabic or Kheymehgāh in Persian, was built as a symbolic edifice denoting the approximately five-kilometre space comprising the ephemeral encampment (Interview Iran-based religio-pragmatics professor 26 September 2021). This lexical appreciation of territoriality clarifies the encampment's geographic ambiguity and explains the approximated symbolic edifice's construction southwest of Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine near the Al-Hurr shrine, another poetically prescribed sacred space. Figure 12 depicts the development of Imam al-Husayn's encampment over time.



**Figure 12.** Former views of the Husayni encampment at Karbala. Source: Ahmad Alavi, Iraq: *Rahnema-ye Safar-e Ziyarati* [Iraq: Travel Guide] Ma'rouf: Qom, 2010.

The al-Hurr shrine is another example of a poetically prescribed sacred space contributing to the reproduction of collective identity in Karbala. Located approximately seven kilometres west of Imam al-Husayn's sacred sanctuary, the shrine links the story of al-Hurr during the events of Ashura to collective Shi'i identity and memory. The story of al-Hurr b. Yazid al-Riyāhī (d. 61 AH/680) is an important focal point the broader Karbala martyrdom narrative. Belonging to the Kufan elites, al-Hurr was initially a commander for the governor of Kufa, 'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 67 AH/686-87) against Imam al-Husayn. Al-Hurr was one of the greatest warriors in Kufa (al-Tabarī 1968, vol. 5, p. 403). Al-Hurr is venerated for his repentance on the Day of Ashura, switching sides to join Imam al-Husayn and his partisans. Al-Hurr first intercepted Imam al-Husayn, but later, on the morning of Ashura, changed his stance and joined him.

After repenting, Al-Hurr and his son, brother, and one or two soldiers joined Imam al-Husayn's army and went to the battlefield, where he fought valiantly. Several accounts assert that Al-Hurr killed more than 40 of Umar b. Sa'd's soldiers before his eventual martyrdom. After Ashura, where al-Hurr died in battle, some of his tribesmen took his body to their district for burial. The Umayyad soldiers did not sever his head, and his shrine remains outside Karbala. Because of his story, al-Hurr is regarded as a symbol of practical, sincere, and last-minute repentance and salvation. One interpretation of his burial location suggests that someone who joins the revolution later must stand a bit farther, not closer to the centre (Interview Iran-based religio-pragmatics professor 26 September 2021). Stories such as al-Hurr's give redemptive power to place. This redemptive place reproduces collective identity because of the tempo-spatial significance of al-Hurr during the historical events of Ashura. Figure 13 highlights how, collectively, Karbala's sacred spaces and poetically ritualised spaces constitute the Ashura assemblage at the core of Karbala's religious urban fabric.



**Figure 13.** Imam al-Husayn's Sacred Sanctuary and its Associated Pilgrimage sites at Karbala. Source: Original graphic rendered from sketch provided by Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani, 2021.



## 8. Results, Discussions and Future Research

Epistemologically, the small sample size focusing on an epistemic community of Shi'i intellectuals and shrine experts proved helpful in generating several interesting and valuable findings. The cross-disciplinary aims of this research and reliance on local understandings were enriched by the respondents' diverse occupational, lineal and scholastic backgrounds. Local understandings uncovered divine lineage to one of Shi'ism's twelve Infallible Imams, insights from an Iran-based professor and pioneer of religio-pragmatics, and reflections from an expert and key architect of "The holy city of Karbala model". Data from interviews also uncovered a descendent of Ibrahim al-Mujab, grandson of the seventh Imam in Shi'ism, Musa al-Kadhim's family had been administrative custodians of Imam al-Husayn's holy shrine and sacred sanctuary for over four generations. Local understandings also revealed a novel pragmatic distinction between collective transnational collective Shi'i identity and collective Shi'i identity. Methodologically, specific respondents' identities could be categorised as transnational. However, pragmatic emphasis on collective "trans-national" identity emerged problematic because it implied a tacit degree of state centrism. Whereas collective Shi'i identity, at its purest interpretive form, would not factor the modern state-system in its conception of sovereign identity. In many ways, primary source interpretive difference and consistency concerning territoriality, urbanity, and the position and power of place echo [Pred's \(1984\)](#) sentiment of place as a "process of becoming" (p. 287), articulated collectively by the participants' collective responses. Connecting these local understandings is the Ashura Assemblage's symbolic spaces reproducing collective Shi'i identity. It is necessary to emphasise the inherently intersectional nature of the so-called "Karbala Paradigm's" significance. Due to this inherent intersectionality, it is not only necessary but legitimate and essential - to move beyond "paradigms" and political dimensions (both IPE and IR) when analysing the socio-religious phenomenality of Shi'i rituals, identity and memory associated with Karbala and Ashura.

Karbala's religious-cultural landscape or "Ashura Assemblage" fosters collective Shi'i identity through connected spaces. Collective Shi'i identity and memory are tangibly represented by an assemblage of Ashura-oriented spaces, while rituals contribute to the enhanced perceptual value of Ashura. The nucleus and sacred core of Karbala's Ashura assemblage is the shrine and tomb of Imam al-Husayn and Ali al-Akbar. The sacred core is contained within a broader peripheral concentric sacred space of the shrine and holy sanctuary, containing several cultural objects and the collective tomb of Ashura martyrs. The sanctuary is one component of the assemblage linked by the sacralised Bayn al-Haramayn to the shrine of Imam al-Abbas. Connecting the assemblage is a constellation of Ashura-oriented ephemeral places, historical meeting spots and epiphenomenal shrines and mosques. Taken together, one can argue, this religious spatial assemblage fosters collective Shi'i identity. This study demonstrates how an assemblage of sacred spaces, taken as methodological units illuminated primarily by local understandings—can be articulated without using an ontological template from novel social assemblage ([Deleuze and Guattari 1980](#); [Latur 2007](#); [Delanda 2006, 2016](#)).

Avenues for potential future research may point towards and indeed require broader methodological undertakings where theories of assemblage and social complexity are utilised to illuminate religious constellations in urban geographic settings. Drawing on [Holland \(2013\)](#)'s illuminated reading of [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1980\)](#) aesthetic ontology, this could take shape in three potential ways. First, as "territorial motifs" or expressions of autonomy where such "qualities entertain variable or constant relations with one another; they no longer constitute [mere indexes] that mark a territory, by motifs and counterpoints that express the relation of the territory to interior impulses or exterior circumstances" ([Holland 2013](#), p. 69). Second, by abstracting "territorial assemblage" and instituting, as Deleuze and Guattari concede: "religion, that is common to human beings and animals, occupies territory only because it depends on . . . [a] territorializing factor as its necessary condition" ([Holland 2013](#), p. 321) As applied to the Ashura Assemblage, collective Shi'i identity and memory would appear a dependent territorialising factor. Finally, one might

draw on [Deleuze and Guattari's \(1980\)](#) collective “assemblages of enunciation” where collective agents are understood to refer “not just to people or societies but to multiplicities of all kinds” ([Holland 2013](#), p. 93). This application may direct attention to how Karbala's Ashura Assemblage and its methodological units are associated with assemblages of enunciation and are thus capable of reproducing collective Shi'i identity through various forms of expression.

## 9. Conclusions

This study examined how Karbala's cultural landscape reproduces collective Shi'i identity based on spots and spaces relevant to the events of Ashura. Significantly, Ashura-oriented sacred spaces and their poetic ritualisation reproduce collective Shi'i identity. After introducing this study's methods and theoretical constructs, the first section situated Karbala's geo-cultural significance in Shi'ism through the events of Ashura. Next, this section discussed how Karbala's sacred spaces construct the city as a focal point of transnational Shi'i pilgrimage. Emphasising the exceptional position of Karbala's sacred sanctuary, the section outlined the significance of Infallibility in Shi'ism as a metric for measuring the relative status of mosques and shrines, elevating the position of Karbala. The second section anatomised Karbala's major and minor pilgrimage places and spaces constituting the Ashura assemblage. This procedure involved depicting concentric and other peripheral sacred places and spaces within Imam al-Husayn's holy sanctuary and illustrating its associated pilgrimage sequences. The following subsection described the relevance of various spaces and rituals in the holy shrine while also discussing the importance of the *Qiblah* direction. The third section highlighted how the entire city and its environs represent a broader locus of pilgrimage and collective Shi'i identity. This brought attention to the nature of sacralised spaces such as the Bayn al-Haramayn. The final section depicted several spaces of prescribed ritual in and around Karbala, geographically relevant to the historical events of Ashura. Karbala's assemblage of Ashura-oriented spaces, its sites of collective pasts, and poetically ritualised sacred landscape combine cultural heritage and natural experience. Ultimately, Karbala's cultural landscape locus informs the space's ideological representation as a sacred reminder of Shi'i history, identity, heritage, memory and pilgrimage. The research highlights the collective importance of each factor as crucial to understanding how Karbala reproduces collective identity. The results represent an innovative and novel understanding of Karbala as a sacred city constructed by tangible spaces and structures, intangible stories and narratives, fostering a unique cosmology of collective Ashura-based identity. Collectively, these findings suggest a role for Shi'i shrine cities as dynamic spaces of cultural heritage and collective identity.

## 10. Interviews Conducted

Dr. Sayyid Ahmad Salmaan Aal To'mah. September 2021.

Iranian religio-pragmatics pioneer. September 2021.

Karbala based Shi'i intellectual. September 2021.

Karbala based Shi'i intellectual. September 2021

Najaf based Shi'i intellectual. September 2021.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Australian National University (Protocol 2021/521) Approved 23/09/2021.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to acknowledge and thank the participants for their willingness to contribute to this study. Particular thanks are owed to religio-pragmatics pioneer Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani for his assistance in obtaining primary source materials, and guid-

ance in conceptualising these materials. Thanks are also owed to Marshall Clark for providing constructive and necessary feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript, to Ryan Pike for assistance navigating the IPE suite, and to Simon Mabon for instructive feedback navigating the “Karbala Paradigm”.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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