



Un-inventing the Bab al-Khalil tombs

**Between the magic of legend
and historical fact**

*This essay is part of an ongoing
series of reviews of Jerusalem's
cemeteries.*

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Facing the Bab al-Khalil tombs, across the street
from the Jerusalem Citadel.

Source: W. Pearlman

The city of Jerusalem holds a prominent position in Islamic dogma and belief. While a thorough examination of the city's standing is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting the Islamic tradition that Judgment Day will be staged in Jerusalem. This tradition is visible in the architectural development of the city, and perhaps explains why it became the preferred burial site for many of the Prophet's Companions, saints, sufis, and other prominent personalities.

Possibly the most distinctive manifestation of this tradition is found in the wide variety of funerary edifice styles and names preserved in historical sources of sites in Jerusalem and the Haram al-Sharif that are closely tied to the literature of asceticism and Judgment Day. For example, al-Awash Dome [the Dome of the Spirit in the Dome of the Rock terrace], Awash Well [the Well of the Spirit positioned in the cave of the Dome of the Rock], al-Sirat [the bridge to paradise in Muslim tradition], "al-Bawa'il" scales [Arcades, a group of arches supported

by piers and columns], Jehennam valley [Valley of Hell, southwest of the Old City], al-Sahirah [term referring to the Land of the Resurrection, found in many Jerusalem place names], Bab al-Rahma [Mercy Gate cemetery, many of the prophet's *sahaba* are believed to be buried here] and Bab al-Tuba [the Golden Gate, where the Messiah will enter Jerusalem on the Day of Judgment in Muslim tradition] are all sites directly connected to this belief.

Jerusalem's burial sites, ranging from humble tombs to large architectural complexes, grew in number during its Islamic eras. This rich diversity led the late Kamel al-'Asali to devote an entire book to the topic: *Our Forefathers in the Soil of Jerusalem*.¹ There is no need to quote from al-'Asali's work here; most of the tombs he mentions are well-known. Still, a few are in need of study, and among these are the Bab al-Khalil tombs. New documents shed additional light on the origin of these legendary structures and their possible occupants.

The Bab al-Khalil tombs lay twelve meters to the east of Bab al-Khalil (Jaffa Gate) on the northern side of Caliph Omar bin al-Khattab Square, which opens from Bab al-Khalil, and opposite the northeastern section of the Jerusalem Citadel. Bab al-Khalil is the only gate in the western side of Jerusalem's walls. It was ordered built by Sultan Suleiman al-Qanuni in 945/1538-1539.² The tombs are bordered on the west and east by two modern two-story buildings. The ground floor of the western building is today a store that sells jewels and antique bric-a-brac, while the ground floor of the eastern building serves as a tourist information center. To their north, the tombs are bordered by a wall comprised of five courses of masonry. South of the tombs runs a public street and open square.

The tombs themselves consist of two stone graves constructed upon an exposed stone base of uneven form (the height of its flanks differs: the eastern flank is 440 cm, the northern flank is 520 cm, the western flank is 380 cm, and the southern flank is 540 cm). The base sits 1.3 meters higher than that of the public street, thus compensating for the low foundation of the two graves. Each grave consists of one course of stone topped by a cylindrical mortar support holding up the grave's two 'crowns', one on each end of the grave. Stone graves within closed tombs typically consist of three to four courses of dressed stone.

The two graves are similar in size (150 cm by 50 cm), overall form and construction style, but differ in the shape of the tombs' crowns. The two crowns of the western tomb are simple in form. Each is polished stone on the eastern side, and raw stone on the western side. The eastern tomb, on the other hand, boasts a western crown of a skillfully-made 'turban' resting on a many-sided stone base with chamfered corners and embellished with decorations forming a small *mihrab* [prayer niche indicating the direction of Mecca] with a pointed arch. Its eastern head is fashioned in an onion shape resting upon a round stand, which narrows towards the top and is decorated with



inverted pointed arches similar to the small mihrab. The presence of such a well-made turban suggests that the individual buried in the grave was important, perhaps a learned man or Islamic scholar.



To the western side of the burial area, there is a large fig tree whose roots now threaten the safety of these two graves, particularly the eastern one, and which requires some removal and pruning. There are also two towering cypress trees to the east and west of the burial space. The architectural condition of the graves is good, but they are in need of general maintenance and an information plaque to help put an end to the legend that persists about the identity of their occupants. The graves are also threatened by one other environmental hazard - air conditioning units installed by neighboring residents expel heat that causes obvious harm to these architectural treasures, besides disturbing the sanctity of the dead with their noise.

The identity of the graves' occupants, the time of burial, and the dating of the tombs themselves remains a mystery even today. Nor is it known why this location was chosen, despite its distance from al-Haram al-Sharif, which had a special draw as the site of numerous tombs. Was it because Bab al-Khalil, during the Ottoman era, welcomed many visitors to the city who were then obliged to stop and recite the *Fatiha* [the opening chapter of the Qur'an] and pray for mercy upon the souls of those buried here? Or was it because the individuals lain to rest had a strong connection of some sort to the neighboring Jerusalem Citadel?

The existence of these tombs is given no mention by Mujir al-Din al-Hanbali, the historian of Jerusalem and Hebron in the Mamluk period, in his comprehensive book, *Al-Uns al-Jalil bi Tarikh al-Quds wa al-Khalil* [*Splendid Familiarity with the History of Jerusalem and Hebron*]³. This supports the tendency to date these tombs after 900 H/1495 CE, the year which Majir al-Din closed his history (despite that he himself did not die until 928 H/1522 BC). Much later, Tawfiq Canaan suggested the tombs belong to warriors, but gave no further details.⁴ Al-'Asali simply reported the grave occupants as unknown.⁵

Popular history in some cases has attributed these tombs to Beni Hassan, due to the presence of a nearby mosque until several decades ago (1950) which was called “Beni Hassan”.⁶ Upon reviewing the Beni Hassan Mosque file at the Jerusalem religious Waqf office, however, I found no reliable reference to dispel the veil of mystery that shrouds the origin of these tombs.

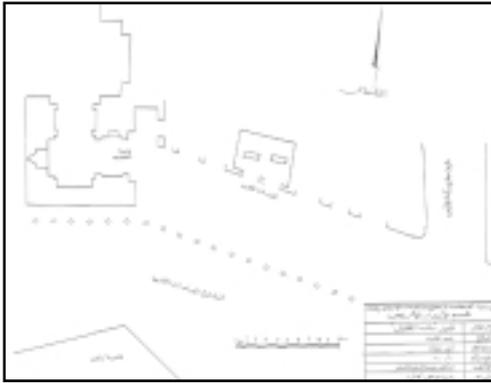
There is yet another opinion that these tombs belong to Haj Muhammad al-Safuti,⁷ who appears to have lived near the site of these graves. The records of the Jerusalem Islamic Court, however, only provide information about the site before the tombs were built. They do not specifically indicate who lies in these two graves, but rather disclose that Haj Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Safuti made an endowment for his children of three adjoining homes and a bakery on the site of these tombs on 13 Rajab 998/18 May 1590.⁸

But the most persistent legend circulating today about these tombs is that repeated by most tour guides. The tale goes that these two graves belong to the two architects responsible for constructing the walls of Jerusalem at the behest of Sultan Suleiman al-Qanuni. According to this tradition, the sultan ordered that the two unfortunates be executed because they failed to include Mount Nabi Daoud [Mount Prophet David, also known as Mount Zion] within Jerusalem’s walls.

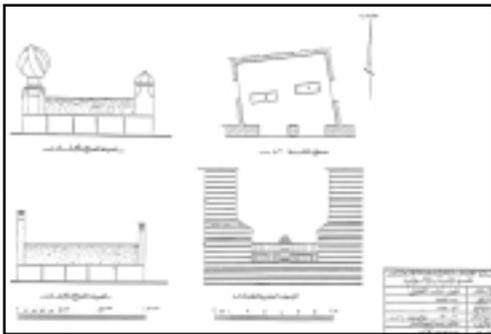
This legendary tale is both intriguing and distorting. It invokes revulsion in listeners and alludes to the Sultan’s oppression and injustice towards his constituents. It appears that this tradition found its way first into the minds of the masses, and then was propagated by those interested in heritage and tourism during the beginning of the last century on the basis of Hanauer’s mention (without any support) in his book *The Holy Land: Myths and Legends*.⁹ While a tour guide may mention that this is only legend, it is often lodged in the mind of listeners as fact.

Among Jerusalem residents, this legend’s intrigue is not limited to the Sultan’s cruelty and the punishment he meted out to the architects, but has actually developed to endow Suleiman al-Qanuni with extraordinary powers. As a young boy, I was told that upon completion of the wall’s construction and the sultan’s notification in Istanbul, Suleiman looked into a clear glass cup and saw that Mount Nabi Daoud was not within the fortifications. He was furious and punished those responsible with execution.

Here we must ask if the major elements of this legend fit historical facts. Before examining other available evidence, we must determine how important it would have been to the sultan to include Mount Nabi Daoud within Jerusalem’s walls. Jerusalem was fortified for several interrelated purposes¹⁰ - military, religious, economic and aesthetic - in response to both local and global circumstances. The standing Ottoman walls were in many places constructed upon the foundations and remains of Ayyubid and Fatimid walls that predated the Ottoman period. The fact is that Mount Nabi



Daoud was never included within the city's fortifications. With the exception of the Nabi Daoud shrine, (then smaller than the current complex) and a humble Franciscan monastery, there were no significant buildings on Mount Nabi Daoud.



As such, there was no real urgency to include this mountain within Jerusalem's city walls, particularly as doing so would cost significant time and effort. The mountain inclines sharply to the south and southwest, and it appears that the mountain's topographical formation itself offers defensive protection. Building a wall before and around it would not add any defensive value to an area devoid of construction and population. Moreover, any invader would think well before attacking the city from this side, and surely turn to the area of Bab al-Khalil

and the region east of Bab al-Amud [Damascus Gate] where it would be much easier to penetrate the city and its walls.

Subsequently, I do not believe that Mount Nabi Daoud was a priority for those responsible for the walls' construction. We are certain today that near Bab al-Nabi Daoud, by the southern section of al-Sharaf alley in particular, the Ottoman walls do follow the foundations of previous walls. During excavations of the ancient foundations, workers found an earthenware jug (a waterwheel scoop) containing brass coins. Following their discovery, the archeological finds were deposited with the Islamic Court by the master builder Hussein bin Nimr and clerk Yaqoub al-Yaziji.¹¹

Alternatively, stories concerning the area of Mount Nabi Daoud likely originated with the slow progress that was made (as attested in historical documents) in constructing that section of the wall. It appears that there was a scarcity of building materials available to the laborers, particularly since construction of the wall had been underway for several years. This scarcity of materials drove the wall's administrative and financial supervisor to demolish a room in the Franciscan monastery in order to use its stones in the wall. The judge of Jerusalem's Islamic Court subsequently ruled that the room be rebuilt.¹²

Historical documents indicate that Muhammad Celebi al-Naqqash, the administrative and financial supervisor (secretary of the Sultan's funds and of the construction of Jerusalem's walls) was accused of failure to complete the wall within the time limit set forth. The accusation of negligence was defeated, however, due to his assistant Darwish al-Halabi's insistence on telling the truth and standing as witness that al-Naqqash had expended all efforts in hastening to construct the wall.¹³

Further challenging our legend, studies have shown that the walls of Jerusalem were neither built by Sinan as reputed¹⁴ nor by only two architects, as this legend goes, but rather constructed by a team of local architects and architects from Aleppo, the most famous of which were the master architects Darwish al-Halabi and Hussein bin Nimr, whose progeny in Jerusalem were subsequently known as the al-Nimri family.

Finally, we must ask, if Sultan Suleiman indeed ordered the execution of two architects, then why would he subsequently honor them with a respectable burial site and decorate the two graves with crowns appropriate for commemorating a distinguished person? All of these points raise serious doubts about the historicity of this legend. The question remains, then: to whom do these tombs belong?

While historical documents have offered valuable information about Jerusalem's walls and Mount Nabi Daoud and its relationship to the walls, information about the two graves remains limited. What is the relationship between the two tombs? An observer of burial methods would assume the presence of an underground chamber or space below the tombs to hold the remains of the graves' occupants, as exists in many of Jerusalem's tombs (al-Qiramiyya, al-Tashtamuriyya, al-Jaliqiyya, and al-Arghuriyya tombs, for example). Moreover, there is the pressing question as to whether there once stood a dome covering these tombs, as is common elsewhere, or whether they were exposed graves.

The architectural elements that remain at the site do not help us in forming a detailed picture of what originally stood there. However, documentation and the accompanying brief description of the endowment of Haj Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Safuti is of assistance. By noting the architectural contrast between the tombs and their stone base as compared with the two buildings bordering them to the east and west (the stones are different, as is the construction style), we can posit that these tombs are all that remain of Haj Ibrahim al-Safuti's property.

Waqf documents state that Haj Ibrahim al-Safuti owned, on that parcel of land, three adjoining houses and a bakery and that those houses included living quarters, open spaces, water cisterns and utilities. Adjacent to one of those houses was a small vegetable garden with a cave. The two graves were most likely constructed in the vegetable garden and their occupants interned in the cave, rather than in a burial

chamber. It therefore appears that the tombs sat exposed in the center of an open space that belonged to one of the three houses. In this respect they are similar to the warriors' tombs located in the Mu'zimiyya School at the end of Bab al-'Atam road (Bab al-Malak Faisal or al-Dawadariyya) which leads to the Haram al-Sharif.

Despite this important information found in the Waqf documents for Haj Ibrahim bin al-Safuti, we still do not know the identity of the graves' occupants and the date that the vegetable garden was transformed into a burial area.

In digging through the records of the Jerusalem Islamic Court, I was lucky enough to stumble upon a brief but important document that helps to banish some of the mystery surrounding these two graves. This document records the appointment of an employee to a water basin, which the document says lies next to the "al-Safadiyya tombs". The document is seven lines long and written in the Naskh calligraphy style. It is found in record number 151, page 450, and carries the serial number 2175. The date of this document is 19 Dhu al-Hijja 1066, or 8 October, 1656. The entire text reads as follows:

(1) Our master and patron, pride of Islamic judges, leader of Islamic scholars and Hadith specialists, descendent of pragmatic academics, exemplar of patrons, full moon of the endless sky, the Islamic judge, master Abu al-Barakat Muhammad Sharaf al-Din (2) al-Khalidi, whose distinguished signature appears above, fully appoints his associate, may his virtues and lofty position be sustained, the holder of this legal document and carrier of this binding message, pride of his peers Ibrahim Besheh, son of the pride of the upright Sheikh Muhammad, (3) known as Ibn Mishmish al-Yankajari, to the Jerusalem Citadel in the position of caretaker of the water basin located near Bab al-Khalil in noble Jerusalem adjacent to the tombs known (4) as al-Safadiyya and including its daily income, an 'Uthmani, from the endowment of al-Safadiyya in noble protected Jerusalem in the place of Ibrahim bin Ismail bin [illegible] (5) by virtue of his cession of that to him on the date below by his choice and good will. Our master, the aforementioned judge, may God forever place him in grace, fully permits the aforementioned Ibrahim Besheh to commence (6) the aforementioned position and appoint a replacement upon need and receive the income stated above in writing on the nineteenth of the holy month Dhu al-Hijja of 1066 (7) Sheikh Zakariya al-Diri, Sheikh Afif al-Din, Sheikh Taqi al-Din, Sheikh Fakhr al-Din, Sheikh Fathallah, Sheikh Kheirallah, Omar Jalabi, Sheikh Ibrahim, his scribe.

On the basis of this text it is possible to deduce that tombs subsequently known as the 'Safadiyya' tombs had been constructed on a section of Haj Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Safuti's property. It is also possible to conclude that among the tombs' components was a water basin, as is the case in several Jerusalem sites - the water basins of the Tashtamuriyya School, the Amir Baraka Khan tomb, and the Qarmiyya Zawiyya. These tombs had religious endowments and were provided an income from which was paid the salary of the person appointed to care for the water basin.

We still do not know the specific circumstances under which these tombs were constructed. The date of their construction can be said to fall between the endowment of Sheikh Ibrahim al-Safuti dated 13 Rajab 988/17 May 1590, and the date of Ibrahim Basheh's appointment on 19 Dhu al-Hijja 1066/8 October 1656. This means that the tombs date to the first half of the eleventh Islamic century or the seventeenth Gregorian century. I hope that evidence will soon be uncovered in the records of the Jerusalem Islamic Court that provide a more specific date. We can further hypothesize that the occupants of the two graves were likely emirs or scholars from Safad, in reference to the tombs' name, al-Safadiyya.¹⁵ It is known that during the Mamluk period Safad was an important centre and administrative capital, a Mamluk kingdom within the Mamluk state.

Given this discovery, one wonders if these tombs might revert to their historic name, the Safadiyya tombs, thus dispelling the persistent cloud of mystery. Given ongoing attempts to warp Arab and Islamic history in Jerusalem within the context of Israeli control, it seems more likely that the legend will persist. The magic of legend and its mystery is stronger than historical truth, despite the latter's unadulterated innocence.

Appendix

Text of the endowment of Haj Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Safuti
Register 72, Page 2, Document 34
13 Rajab 998/17 May 1590

Praise to God, who will ready a magnificent reward for those standing at His gate and who will generously bestow upon them their divine recompense. Prayers and peace upon the noble Prophet (2), the merciful the compassionate, and upon his family and his companions of the upright religion and straight path. Eternal prayers and peace upon them all until the Day of Reckoning. (3) In following, this document is a legal Islamic endowment and an unambiguous contract for an agreed upon and binding religious bequest issued in the Holy Land, may God Almighty exalt it, by (4) our master, the exemplar of delegates and the cream of intelligent scholars, the Hanafi Islamic magistrate who will sign his noble signature above. (5) It is sworn that Muhammad al-Safuti (6) endows and bequeaths for eternity and gives alms

seeking the satisfaction of munificent God Almighty and desiring his magnanimous reward on the day God recompenses those who gave. (7) The reward of do-gooders is assured. Muhammad al-Safuti endows his possessions and legal property, which remained in his hands until (8) the issue of this endowment, and which is for **the sum of three adjacent houses in noble Jerusalem at Mahallat beni Harith (9) near the victorious fortress, and the sum of a bread bakery adjacent to them. The aforementioned houses include two floors, living spaces, open spaces, water cisterns for collecting winter rains, and facilities. One of the houses has a vegetable garden (10) that is cultivated and a cave and legal rights.** [Emphasis added] Bordering all this from the south is a mill belonging to the children of the representative of the Citadel that ends at a vegetable garden, the endowment of (11) Haj Bali, which ends at the home of Ahmed the son of the wife of al-Tomar. To the east, this is bordered by the home of the endowment of Haj Bali and to the north by the passable road on which is the gate. (12) To the west is a passable road, the square opposite the fortress, and the door to the bakery and the door of one of the aforementioned houses. Muhammad al-Safuti endows all this with all of its rights (13) including its roads and walls and anything belonging to it or related to it, either connected to it or separate, and including all legal rights of the legally indisputable endowment (14) of the aforementioned endower. May this endowment not be erased (15) or obliterated, and may its reward with God not be lost. Rather, the more that time passes, may the endowment be strengthened and remain so for eternity (16) until God inherits the Earth and those upon it for He is the most worthy of inheritors. The aforementioned endower, may God be generous with his rewards, grants (17) this endowment to himself for the remainder of his life and following that to his children, and they are, of the males, Muhammad and Ali, two full grown men and, of (18) the females, Fatima, Aisha and Halima, sound-minded women of age, and Safiya, underage, fairly between them all, males and females, (19) without preference to any of them over the others. Following these children the endowment will go to their children and then their grandchildren and then their great grandchildren (20) and then their descendents, so that the share of whoever among them dies is transferred to their child or grandchild or their descendents, if their child is not alive. (21) Those who die without a child or grandchild or descendent, their share returns to those at their same familial rank. If they all die out (22) and time banishes them to the last, and no descendents remain to the endower, then it will become an endowment for the noble Muhammadan shrine, (23) may the best of prayers and peace be upon its occupant. If its disbursement is unfeasible, may refuge be sought in God Almighty, it will be an endowment for the poor Muslims from (24) the nation of our master Muhammad, the best of prayers and greetings upon him. The aforementioned endower, may God be generous with his rewards, stipulates for his endowment (25) conditions that must be followed, including that supervision of this endowment remains his own for the remainder of his life and following that goes to his oldest child (26) and then the next oldest. If the endowment goes to the noble shrine or poor people, then the Islamic magistrate will oversee it. Another of the endower's stipulations is that the supervisor of (27) the aforementioned endowment will commence, with its income, construction, renovation and repair and whatever else is required for its continued

existence. What remains will be fairly divided between those with rights to it. (28) Each of those with rights to it has the right to benefit from their share of it by way of using the houses as a home. He also stipulates, specifically for himself, [the right to make] additions, removals, (29) extensions and limitations, but not to allow anyone else following him to do anything of the sort. The aforementioned endower, may God Almighty be generous with his rewards, grants this endowment in accordance with this document (30) and this bequest in accordance with that agreed upon, seeking the satisfaction of God Almighty the day that God rewards those who gave alms. The reward of do-gooders is assured. Those who (31) seek to change it or prevent it from running its course, God will settle score with them and punish them for their actions on the day that hearts run dry. This endowment is complete and binding and (32) its rulings are executed and ratified. The endower has removed this endowment from his property and made himself the caretaker of it. Those who knowingly change it commit a sin. (33) God is all-knowing and all-hearing. The endowment is complete and its content is legally confirmed before our master, the aforementioned judge, (34) by the witnesses signed below following the submission of the legal case in the legal manner from a legal claimant, (35) while legally exempting the endower from that. The soundness of this endowment and its general and specific requirements has been ruled, including (36) its legal conditions and explicit duties, following its submission and consideration. It is issued on the 13th of Rajab, 998. (37) Witnesses Judge Ismail, Judge Abdel Wahid, Judge Hassan bin Ibrahim, 998.

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Endnotes

¹ Kamel al-'Asali, *Ajdaduna fi Thari Beit al-Maqdis [Our forefathers in the soil of Jerusalem]*, (Amman: 1981).

² The Islamic year is mentioned first, followed by the corresponding Gregorian date.

³ Majir al-Din al-Hanbali, *Al-Uns al-Jalil bi Tarikh al-Quds wa al-Khalil [Splendid Familiarity with the History of Jerusalem and Hebron]* (Amman: 1973).

⁴ Tawfic Canaan, *Mohammadan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (1927) 33.

⁵ Al-'Asali, 94.

⁶ Arif al-Arif, *Al-Mufassal fi Tarikh al-Quds* [A detailed history of Jerusalem], (Jerusalem: 1961) 496.

⁷ Al-'Asali, 1981, 94

⁸ See the endowment text in the appendix.

⁹ Hanauer, J., *The Holy Land. Myths and Legends*. (London, Sheldon: 1907) 61-62.

¹⁰ Yusuf Said al-Natsheh, "The Architecture of Ottoman Jerusalem", in *Ottoman Jerusalem -the Living City 1517-1917*, Eds. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand, part I, pp. 583-655 (Altajir World of Islam Trust, London: 2000) 601.

¹¹ Ibid, 603.

¹² A. Cohen, "On the Expulsion of the Franciscans from Mount Zion", *Turcica*, 18 (1986) 151.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Yusef Said al-Natsheh, "Hel Samam al-Mu'amari Sannan Bab al-Amud?" [Did the architect Sinan design Damascus Gate?] in *Hawliat al-Quds* [Jerusalem Yearbook], *Second Volume* (Institute for Palestine Studies: 2004) 31.

¹⁵ Today there remains a distinguished family living in Jerusalem known as the Safadi family.