Joseph’s Shrine is located on the outskirts of the eastern side of the city of Nablus (fig. 1), near Tell Balatah, the site of the Canaanite City of Shechem, and 300 m northwest of Jacob’s Well (Pummer 1993: 139; Bruce 1994: 102). Joseph’s tomb has been venerated throughout the ages by Samaritans (for whom it is the second-holiest site), Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The total area of Joseph’s Shrine is 661 m² and it is located in Block 5, parcel 10, according to early Islamic Immovable Property Records from the Department of Al Awqaf Al Islamyah (Jordanian Islamic Endowments), Nablus (fig. 2). Originally situated on an agricultural plain, it is now surrounded by buildings, due to expansion of housing and schools in central Balata.

Joseph’s Shrine is an Islamic maqam, a small, cube-shaped, domed tomb. It is owned by the Islamic Department of Al-awqaf in Nablus and is dedicated to the Old Testament patriarch Joseph, a revered Islamic prophet. Records of ownership can be found in a 1957 document issued before the sanctuary functioned as a mosque and school. The building is in the Ottoman-style and consists of a northern courtyard with a central font and a domed inner room with a stone cenotaph as the focus of veneration. The building of sanctuaries and shrines spread during the Byzantine era throughout Palestine (313–638 CE). It is probable that the building housing Joseph’s tomb or cenotaph was constructed during the Ayyubid (1171–1259 CE) or Mamluk (1260–1516 CE) period by the Muslim community, in the same way that other Islamic sanctuaries had been created to venerate the prophets Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and others.

Our project was undertaken between April 2017 and December 2018 by the Department of Tourism and Archaeology within the History Department at An-Najah National University, with the collaboration of the mayor of Nablus. Our procedure was to collect data by seeking permission to visit the site to take photographs and execute and compile descriptions of the shrine and architectural drawings, and to examine the relevant documents at the Immovable Property Records at the Al Awqaf Al Islamyah Department (Jordanian Islamic Endowments).

The shrine is an integral part of the cultural history of Palestine for two primary reasons. First, with its diverse religious history, it has been of great importance to all the main religious groups in Palestine: the Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan religions have all regarded it as an important place of veneration and prayer. Second, in terms of living architectural heritage, it serves as a model of traditional Islamic shrines that have formed part of the landscape for centuries.

In undertaking this up-to-date architectural study of the shrine, we aimed first to conserve this heritage by documenting it in writing as well as in maps and photographs, and by drawing attention to the problems that need to be overcome in order to preserve it. Second, owing to the severe damage to the shrine during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, the shrine required repair and restoration to protect it for future generations.
during the second Intifada (2000–2007), we at An-Najah National University, in collaboration with the Governorate of Nablus, aimed to provide protection for the building to secure it against future damage. The building is not only a part of the cultural heritage of Palestine, but is also a world heritage site that should provide free and open access to all religious communities. A third aim was to prevent hegemony and slavery from interfering with peace and tolerance within the Palestinian community and in particular to resolve the core conflicts between the different religions. Lastly, Joseph’s Shrine is among the sites that need to be protected in order to prevent the potential loss of Palestine’s archaeological heritage through problems arising from vandalism, destruction, and looting at shrines and tombs, when laws are not enforced to counter the problem.

Historical Sources

Historical information for our study derives from five sources. These include (1) archaeological and architectural information, as, for example, in the Madaba Mosaic Map and nineteenth-century descriptions; (2) references to the site by European pilgrims and historians; (3) religious texts such as the Old Testament; (4) historical Islamic Waqf or endowment documents; and (5) various archives (figs. 2–4). The earliest sources are from the book of Joshua in the Old Testament. From this biblical account have arisen many religious beliefs and legends regarding the remains of Joseph that are unverifiable. However, veneration of the prophet has attained great significance for the major religions in Palestine. There are sources indicating that the prophet Joseph was not buried in Palestine, but in Egypt after he served as vizier of ancient Egypt during the Second Intermediate period (1650–1550 BCE) and, based on the biblical reference Josh 24:32, a legend claims Joseph’s remains were transported from Egypt to Palestine. The first historical eyewitness account of Joseph’s tomb was made in 333 CE by an anonymous pilgrim from the French province of Bordeaux, although no details of the building itself were given: “At the foot of the mountain itself, is a place called Shechem. Here is a tomb in which Joseph is laid, in the parcel of ground which Jacob his father gave” (Anonymous 1898: 587–88). Eusebius of Caesarea refers to Joseph’s tomb in his Onomasticon: “Shechem, city of Jacob now deserted. The place is pointed out in the suburb of Neapolis. There the tomb of Joseph is pointed out nearby.” Jerome, writing about St. Paula’s time in Palestine wrote that “turning off the way (from Jacob’s well), she saw the tombs of the twelve patriarchs” (Jerome, Opera omnia; Migne 1844, 1: 889). Jerome himself, together with the Byzantine monk George Syncellus, who had lived many years in Palestine, wrote that all twelve patriarchs, Joseph included, were buried at Sychem (Guérin 1874: 374).
Jerome writes: “Both Theodosius I and II ordered a search for Joseph’s bones, much to the utter dismay of the Samaritan community” (Opera Omnia; Migne 1844, 1: 889). Jerome reported that apparently the Christians intended to remove Joseph’s bones to their city, but a column of fire rose skyward from the tomb frightening them away. The Samaritans subsequently covered the tomb with earth, rendering it inaccessible (Jerome, Opera omnia; Migne 1844, 1: 890).

In the sixth century CE, Christian pilgrim and archdeacon Theodosius (518–520 CE) in his De situ Terrae Sanctae, mentions that “close to Jacob’s Well are the remains of Joseph the Holy” (Golden 2004: 187). Also in the sixth century, during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–565 CE), Joseph’s tomb was included on the Madaba Mosaic Map, indicating the shrine existed before Islam as one of the Christian religious buildings of the period (fig. 5). According to Schenke: “The Madaba Mosaic Map designates a site somewhat problematically with
the legend—‘Joseph’s’ (τὸ τοῦ Ἰωσήφ)—where the usual adjective ‘holy’ (hagios) accompanying mentions of saints and their shrines is lacking” (Schenke 1967: 177).

During the Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods, there is no mention of the building, except by Arab travelers and European historians and geographers who wrote that it was a shrine or maqam built to venerate Joseph. In 1839, during the Ottoman era, the Scottish artist David Roberts depicted the cenotaph at the shrine standing outside the building and appearing to be in a well-conserved state (fig. 6a).

In addition, there are two documents from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries providing information. The first, from the reign of Sultan Abdel Hameed (1876–1909), assigns supervision of the building to the Al-Asamar family, and the second is a letter from 1324 AH/1906 CE from the mayor of Nablus, Tawfiq Hammad (in office 1902–1908), urging the building administrator to undertake restorations on Joseph’s Shrine (figs. 2, 3, and 5). The restored building was functioning as a shrine, a school, and a mosque when the Israeli army took control of it in 1982. According to pictorial images of the shrine from the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, it seems to have been destroyed and rebuilt several times. There is a photograph taken in 1865 in which the site is in a deteriorated state showing the effects of destruction (fig. 6b). In two subsequent photographs taken in 1900 and 1917, the shrine appears in a restored state (fig. 6c–e). A photograph taken in 1954 shows a tree near the main entrance, where the cenotaph had been in David Roberts’s 1839 drawing. (Today, a font occupies a central position in the courtyard; fig. 7). Records of the Islamic Endowments (Al Awqaf Al Islameyeh) have provided significant information. However, we needed to select our information from the most relevant...
documents and copy it manually as photocopying and scanning were not permitted. We verified that the sanctuary was registered in the Immovable Property Records of 1957 as an Islamic religious building by the head of the Al Awqaf Al Islameyeh Department and is a public trust (endowment) building.

In 1967, after occupation of the West Bank by Israel, Muslims were prevented from worshipping at the shrine and it was gradually converted into a Jewish prayer room. Resulting conflict between the two religions frequently occurred due to an ongoing dispute over jurisdiction of the tomb (Hassner 2009: 87). After the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995, the shrine came under Israeli control, with Muslims prohibited from praying there (Hayden 2002: 167). Under the Accords, Jewish visitors are allowed regular access to the site but access to the cenotaph in the interior is restricted to only once a month during the night when Israeli Forces secure the roads leading to the site. During Israel's Operation Shield in 2002, Nablus was reoccupied and Jewish groups returned (Dumper and Stanley 2007: 267). In 2003, there were military skirmishes between the Israeli army and Palestinian youths in which the shrine was partially destroyed. In 2005, the Nablus governorate restored the building, reconstructing the cupola, and setting up a system of maintenance (fig. 8). Nevertheless, in 2011, there was further destruction to the shrine and repairs and restoration again had to be carried out, mainly to the cenotaph.

Archaeological History

As there is no archaeological evidence for Joseph's burial location, in the mid-nineteenth century Wilson suggested carrying out archaeological excavations at the site of Joseph's Tomb (J. Wilson 1847, 2: 61). In the
twentieth century, excavations in the Shechem area excluded Joseph’s Tomb (G. E. Wright 1965: passim). Owing to this, the tomb at Shechem has been considered a religious site rather than a historical one (Freund 2009: 29). Furthermore, the tomb was on open ground without a wall or building at the time. However, one of the first descriptions of the tomb, which began to appear in accounts of travelers in the twelfth century, comes from the English historian William of Malmesbury, who related that it was covered with white marble (Pringle 1998, 2: 94).

By about the middle of the thirteenth century, Joseph’s Tomb was enclosed by a stone wall, and by the end of the seventeenth century there were indications that a small building housed the tomb. Both Maundrell and Wright wrote that they had viewed a small mosque built over the tomb (Adler 1930: 116; Maundrell, 1703: 61; T. Wright 1848: 435). It seems that this was due to the sighting of a niche in the direction of the Qibla in the southern wall. Moreover, the tomb may have been covered with a dome at the time. This can be inferred from the drawing by David Roberts in 1839, which shows the dome destroyed and the walls partially in ruins. The Scottish Orientalist John Wilson reported that the structure had been rebuilt by the head of the Jewish community of Jerusalem in 1749 (J. Wilson 1847, 2: 61). The bishop of Jerusalem, Michael Alexander (d. 1845), visited the tomb toward the mid-nineteenth century and reported that it was an elegant building in a well-preserved state (Alexander 1844: 280).

At this stage in the history of the site, when the building resembled Islamic shrines and small mosques that were now in many villages and on the outskirts of cities, travelers noticed this and wrote about it in their journals and various accounts. Toward the mid-nineteenth century, Birmingham saw a small ruined mosque built over the tomb (Buckingham 1821: 543–44). Randall, prior to 1862, added: “We entered a little squared area, inclosed by a high stone wall, neatly whitewashed. Across one end of this little enclosure is a Muslim tomb, surmounted by a [ruined] dome” (Randall 1868: 286).
The tomb was seen to be not in the middle of the courtyard, but on the western side of the courtyard path near the western wall, lying northwest to southeast at an acute angle to the wall, rather than parallel with it (C. Wilson 1881–1884, 2: 2). The head of the tomb was toward the northern entrance of the courtyard and the foot toward the south (Mills 1864: 65).

The first study of the maqam was undertaken by the British explorer and antiquarian, Claude Reignier Conder (1848–1910). He gave detailed descriptions of the site in his works, Tent Work in Palestine (1878), Survey of Western Palestine (1881), and Palestine (1889). In his descriptions, Conder states that the shrine itself was situated in a square courtyard, measuring 5 × 5 m and was enclosed by 3 m-high walls that were 30 cm in depth, and it was located “on the roadside from Balata to Askar, at the end of a row of fine fig trees.” He comments that the walls were plastered and whitewashed and in a well-conserved state. Nevertheless, he mentions that the typical square-domed maqam that led to the courtyard was in a poor state: “the ruin of a little square domed building.” He noted two Hebrew inscriptions on the southern wall, and an English inscription that referred to the complete reconstruction of the building by Mr. Rogers, the English consul of Damascus before the beginning of 1868. Conder gives the measurements of the cenotaph as 180 cm long and 120 cm wide and describes it, as it is today in its present form, as a rectangular block covered with an arched roof. He found the cenotaph placed at an angle to the western wall and not lying north–south. He describes two plastered pedestals with indented recesses forming the upper surfaces at either end of the tomb. There is evidence that the shrine was used by the Samaritan community—in the recesses or bowls there were the remains of fire from the burning of offerings by the

Figure 10. Floor plan of Joseph’s Shrine. Drawing by I. Iqtait.

Figure 11. Site plan of Joseph’s Shrine. Drawing by I. Iqtait.
Samaritan visitors—and Conder refers to the fact that both communities used the basins for burning oil lamps and incense (Conder and Kitchener 1882: 194–95). J. Golden recognized that the orientation of the cenotaph did not follow the customary direction of Muslim tombs towards Mecca, but did not consider it significant because he also recognized the site as a place of veneration for the Muslim community: “The Shrine points approximately north and south, thus being at right angles to the direction of Moslem tombs north of Mecca. How the Muslims explain this disregard of orientation in so respected a Prophet as ‘our Lord Joseph,’ I have never heard; perhaps the rule is held to be only established since the time of Mohammed. The veneration in which the shrine is held by the Moslem peasantry is, at all events, not diminished by this fact” (Golden 2004: 189).

**Comparison with Other Maqams (Shrines)**

Every community has its own religious beliefs and rituals, through which the faithful try to draw closer to their deity. The sacred places of the prophets and saints are greatly venerated, well-known sites with profound religious significance that includes a belief that miracles are performed by the prophets as intermediaries between the faithful and their god. Therefore, the presence of the prophets in the lives of believers and their need for a strong relationship with them is deeply experienced. This has led to the creation of several hundred sacred places in most cities and villages in Palestine. They appear in a variety of forms: shrines that may also include a tomb; tombs standing alone; caves that may contain a tomb; stone vases; springs or wells; single trees; mounds of stone; or a single rock (Canān 1998: 66–122). Muslim shrines dedicated to local saints and prophets have formed an integral part of the landscape of Palestine. They were of cultural importance and were located in almost all parts of the region, whether in cities, small towns, or in open country, covering the area from

![Figure 12. Section drawings of Joseph's Shrine building. See fig. 7. Drawing by I. Iqtait.](image-url)

![Figure 13. Elevations of the western, eastern, and southern façades of Joseph's Shrine. Drawing by I. Iqtait, 2017.](image-url)
the slopes of Mount Hermon (Jabal Al-Sheikh) in the north to the Negev Desert (Sahra Al-Naqab) in the south and extending from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Great Rift Valley.

Using maps from the British period and additional sources from the 1930s and 1940s, we counted 348 Muslim shrines and sanctuaries (Canán 1927: vi). They can be divided into three groups: (1) those built before the Arab-Islamic conquest (638 CE/16 AH); (2) those built after the Arab-Islamic period; and (3) those built in honor of two highly venerated religious figures, Wali and Al Salihin. Joseph’s Shrine belongs to the first group. It was in existence before the Arab-Islamic conquest, as were sanctuaries in honor of a number of other prophets, including Noah, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Rachael. The design of the buildings in the second and third groups is similar to that of the other maqams found in the Nablus region, as well as throughout Palestine. It consists of a square room with a domed roof for housing the cenotaph, which is oriented toward the south, toward Mecca (qibla). There are two additional rooms for storage (Canán 1927: 4). This is in line with the traditional description of a maqam as a square single-room building with a domed roof. There is usually only one entrance to this main room in which the rectangular cenotaph is found in the center (it may be over an actual grave), covered with a large piece of cloth. In some maqams, a mihrab is located on the southern wall. This consists of a recess for the qibla showing the direction of Mecca; however, the focus is usually on venerating the saint to whom the maqam is dedicated. It is usual for there to be only one window and there may be niches for candles in the walls (Petersen 1996: 99). The building of Joseph’s Shrine closely followed this model.

**Description of the Present Restored Building**

The building was rebuilt in 2005 in the Ottoman style within the 661 m² walled area, with a patio of 150 m². The builder reused the original limestone with modern cement and whitewash to replicate the ancient construction. More restoration work had to be carried out in 2011 after the further destruction mentioned caused by skirmishes. Repairs were needed to the building, but mainly to the marble cenotaph housed in the main room of the shrine; it had suffered the most severe damage. Several of the external marble panels of the lid of the cenotaph had to be replaced, and the external marble panels of the body were also replaced. In addition, damaged lighting fixtures and other fixtures were repaired or replaced and all the structural elements of the site (the courtyard, wall, and main building) were whitewashed again. Joseph’s shrine now comprises the seven units we describe below.

The main entrance (1) to the shrine from the north is 5 m wide and leads to the main courtyard (2) by means of two sets of nine steps on either side; these are built with ashar stone and limestone and filled with gypsum and plaster. The main courtyard leads to the pronaos (3), which leads to the naos and a small room to the west of it. The cenotaph is now located in the naos (4). The Pronaos (Assaha al-Amamiya) measures 7 × 6 m. The entrance consists of a Tudor arch, and the roof is a small domed roof. There is usually one entrance to this main room in which the rectangular cenotaph is found in the center (it may be over an actual grave), covered with a large piece of cloth. In some maqams, a mihrab is located on the southern wall. This consists of a recess for the qibla showing the direction of Mecca; however, the focus is usually on venerating the saint to whom the maqam is dedicated. It is usual for there to be only one window and there may be niches for candles in the walls (Petersen 1996: 99). The building of Joseph’s Shrine closely followed this model.

Ottoman-style smooth limestone dome (figs. 8, 11, and 12). The dimensions of the square naos (Beit Al-Salah) are 6 × 6 m. It contains a marble cenotaph measuring 200 × 140 cm with a height of 114 cm. It is situated in the southern part of the naos near the apse (mihrab). The roof is a dome with a circumference of 6 m and a height of 1.90 m. It is whitewashed in the Ottoman style. The new marble cenotaph was transferred to the naos by Israeli soldiers in 2006. Part of a basalt column is installed near the cenotaph (figs. 9–11). A large room, called the Eastern Room (5) is located on the eastern side of the courtyard, and is entered from the courtyard. The dimensions of the room are 9 × 4 m (36 m²; figs. 11–12). It was an addition to the building during restorations in 2005. But the Western Room (6) is small and can be entered from the courtyard. It measures 4.5 × 3.5 m (figs. 10–12). This room was also added during restorations in 2005. Finally, a restroom (7) with four cubicles is found on the western side of the building. It is accessed from the patio and the dimensions are 5 × 5 m (figs. 10–12). The newly constructed prayer room and restroom for the disabled were also added during restorations in 2005 and are found outside the building in the southeastern corner of the walled courtyard. The dimensions are 3 × 2 m. A well was excavated for storm-water drainage from the dome and roof and drainage from the restroom. (figs. 10–12).

**Conclusion**

Joseph’s Shrine is of great cultural and religious significance to the Palestinian community, not only as an Islamic shrine for veneration of the prophet Joseph, but also as an important heritage site, which has also held great importance in the region through the centuries for the Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan religions. The distinctive Ottoman-Islamic architecture of the restored shrine provides a model of the traditional Islamic shrine. We concur with the Center for Academic Shi’a Studies (2015) and Salah Houdalieh in concluding that vandalism to, and destruction and demolition of, Islamic shrines and tombs of saints can undermine Muslim identity and heritage (Al-Houdalieh 2006). The ongoing practice of destroying shrines also “weakens the spiritual connection of Muslims and other individuals with the essence of religion.” Furthermore, these irresponsible actions can destroy evidence and signs of former societies and thus alter and misrepresent the cultural landscape.

**References**


Correction: The year in the Avi-Yonah reference has been changed in the online edition of this article to reflect the date of first publication, 1954, corrected from the date of 1964 that appears in the print edition.

Loay Abu Alsaud is assistant professor of archaeology and cultural heritage at the Department of Tourism and Archaeology in An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His current research and teaching interests include archaeology and ethnography in Palestine, cultural identity, pottery, and ancient architecture. Several of his fieldwork projects have examined the archaeology of Nablus (Neapolis) during the Roman and Byzantine periods.

Amer Al-Qobbaj is assistant professor of history in the Department of History, Faculty of Humanities, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. His fieldwork research projects examine medieval and modern Islamic and European History.