

For a grave in Damascus...

Text and photos by Yahya Michot. Translated from the French by Jamil Qureshi, 1427/2006

Visit the graves. They will remind you of the hereafter.

(ḥadīth of the Prophet, in MUSLIM, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Janāʾiḏ*, 108)

A city of saints

Damascus has the privilege of providing a last sojourn to an impressive number of the dead whose memory is revered by Muslims.¹ In the interior of the prayer-hall itself of the Umayyad Mosque, there is an enclosure housing the head of the prophet Yaḥyā (John the Baptist). In a room adjacent to the courtyard, it is the head of the grandson of the Prophet, upon him be peace, Husayn, the martyr of Kerbala, that tradition says is buried there. Of all those whose graves it is possible to visit in the Syrian capital—members of the family of the Messenger, his Companions, the learned, the virtuous, and other Friends (*walī*) of God—the one whose name comes most spontaneously to mind is surely Muḥyī l-Dīn ibn ʿArabī.² That might well be because, on the flank of Mount Qasyūn, a whole quarter of the ancient suburb of Ṣāliḥiyya carries his name, ‘Muḥyī l-Dīn’, and because that name is written on the destination-sign or windscreen of all the minibuses and public taxis that make the climb there from the city centre...



At the mausoleum of Ibn ʿArabī

Born in Murcia in Andalusia (560/1165), Ibn ʿArabī spent a part of his life in Seljūq Anatolia and died in Damascus in 638/1240. During the Ottoman conquest of Mamlūk Syria and Egypt in 922–23/1516–17, the sultan Selim II had the imposing funerary complex built around Ibn ʿArabī’s grave that one still sees today—the mausoleum with its green cupola, the spacious mosque in multi-coloured stone with a monumental gate, a courtyard with a central fountain, a hypostyle prayer-hall, and an octagonal minaret with two balconies adorned with

¹ See É. GEOFFROY, ‘L’empreinte de la sainteté’, in *Damas, miroir brisé d’un Orient arabe* (Paris: Autrement, ‘HS 65’, 1993), pp. 166–74; *Le culte des saints au Proche Orient* (4 parts), Dec. 2002–Mar. 2003, on the internet: www.oumma.com/spip.php?article513, 521, 562, 584.

² On the tomb of Ibn ʿArabī, see R. ATLAGH, ‘Le tombeau du sceau des saints à Damas’ in M. A. AMIR-MOEZZI (ed.), *Lieux d’islam. Cultes et cultures de l’Afrique à Java* (Paris: Autrement, ‘HS 91/92’, 1996), pp. 132–53.

stalactites. Imperial favour for the ‘Shaykh al-akbar’ attested in this way assuredly contributed to the development of a cult. One need spend only a few moments at the tomb of Ibn ‘Arabī to gauge the attractive power it still wields. Ordinary residents of the quarter go there in the course of their daily errands. People come there also from the centre of Damascus and the whole of Syria. One will also meet there Muslims from every continent and even non-Muslim Westerners. Would so much celebrity have embarrassed the one who is its object? In 1271 (1854–55) a Turkish pasha had the following inscription engraved in handsome gilded lettering on a marble plaque, above the steps leading to the mausoleum: ‘The greatest Shaykh, may his secret be sanctified, said: “Every age is dignified by someone unique on account of whom it is exalted. It is I who shall be, for the rest of time, that unique someone” (*qāla l-shaykh al-akbar quddisa sirru-hu: fa-li-kulli ‘aṣr wāḥidun yasmū bi-hi, wa-anā li-bāqī l-‘aṣri dhāka l-wāḥidu*).’ (This was doubtless uttered in all humility.)



Prayer-hall, laudatory inscription, and cupola of the mausoleum of Ibn ‘Arabī

It would be pointless to look out for the name of Ibn Taymiyya on the destination-sign of a Damascene minibus, and equally pointless to ask a taxi-driver to drive you to his grave. Although the Mamlūk Shaykh al-Islām is one of the first rank of the ulema of classical Islam who died in Damascus, he is certainly not very well known there, and few indeed are those who would have the least idea where he is buried. A surprising destiny, when one remembers the extraordinary phenomenon that was his funeral:

An exceptional burial

‘On the night of Monday, the 20th Dhū l-Qa‘da [728; i.e. Sunday evening 26 September 1328], the shaykh, the imām, the scholar, the banner and emblem, the learned one, who had the Qurʾān by heart, the ascetic, the worshipping servant, the fighter, the exemplar, the Shaykh al-Islām, Taqī al-Dīn Abū l-‘Abbās [...] Ibn Taymiyya, the Ḥarrānian, then the Damascene, passed away in the citadel of Damascus, in the room in which he had been held. Numerous people presented themselves at the citadel and were authorized to enter [and gather] beside him. A group sat beside him before the washing [of his body]. They recited the Qurʾān, sought the *baraka* in looking upon him and giving him a kiss, then withdrew. Thereafter, a group of women presented themselves, acted in the same way [as the men had], then withdrew. Then entry was restricted to those who would wash him. And when they had finished washing him, they were made to leave.

‘The populace then gathered at the citadel and on the road leading to the Mosque [of the Umayyads]. The Mosque also filled, as did its courtyard and the [surrounding area...] The

funeral stretcher appeared at the fourth hour of the day, or towards that time, and was set down in the Mosque. Troops encircled it to protect it from the people, [a necessary precaution] given the density of the throng. He was prayed over the first time at the citadel [...]. Subsequently, he was prayed over at the Mosque of the Umayyads, after the midday prayer. Twice as many more people as we have mentioned above had gathered and this gathering still grew, to the point that the squares, the streets, the markets became too narrow for the residents and those [non-residents] who happened to be there. Subsequently, after he had been prayed over, he was carried above the heads [of the people] and the fingers [of those offering to touch or carry his bier]. The bier went out of the Post Gate, and the throng became yet more dense. Voices were raising with weeping, lamentations, calls for the divine mercy upon him, praises and invocations in his favour. People were throwing onto his bier the cloths covering their heads, their turbans, and their clothing. Sandals slipped off people's feet, as did their clogs, the cloths covering their heads and their turbans. They paid no mind to this, engrossed in watching the funeral stretcher. Above the [people's] heads, the bier came on, at times moving ahead, at times going back, and at times standing still so that people might pass. The people came out of the Mosque through all its doors, and the throng inside was dense. At each door, the throng [seemed to the people there] more dense than at the other [door]. So dense was the throng that the people then left the city from its every gate [...] The situation was serious at the Horse Market, the crowd doubling in numbers and the people forming a mass. There the funeral stretcher was set down and the brother [of Ibn Taymiyya], Zayn al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān, then presided at the prayer over him. This prayer being done, he was moved to the Cemetery of the Sufis and interred beside his brother Sharaf al-Dīn 'Abd Allāh—God have mercy on them both.



The citadel of Damascus

'His burial took place a little time before the afternoon prayer. That was on account of the multitude of those—residents of the gardens, residents of the Ghūta,¹ residents of the villages and others...—who came [to attend the ceremony] and prayed over him. People closed their shops and none failed to be present, except those who were unable to be so, calling for the [divine] mercy upon him, and invoking [the Exalted] in his favour. And certainly, if they had indeed been able to be there, they would not have failed to be so. A multitude of women were

¹ The countryside surrounding Damascus.

present: fifteen thousand, it is estimated, over and above those who were on the terraces and other [places]... All [of the women also] were calling for the [divine] mercy upon him and weeping for him, in the way that we have said. As for the men, it is estimated that they were sixty to a hundred thousand, or more than that, up to two hundred thousand.

‘One group drank the excess water [left over] from the washing of his [body]. Another divided among themselves the remainder of the *sidra*¹ leaves with which he had been washed. Someone paid 150 dirhams for the cord containing quicksilver that he used to wear around his neck to deter lice. For the skull-cap that he used to wear on his head someone paid, it is said, 500 dirhams! During the course of his funeral there was a good deal of hubbub and much weeping. [God’s mercy] was implored [for him], and several recitations of the entire Qurʾān completed for him at Ṣālīḥiyya and in the city. The people came and went around his grave for several days, by night and day. They spent the night beside it or came in the morning. He was the object, in dreams, of many true visions. One group of people bemoaned his passing away in several poetic elegies.’

Such is the record by ʿAlam al-Dīn al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339) of the funeral of the Damascene theologian whose student he had been, as transmitted by another disciple, the famous historian Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373).²

Two destinies...

During the years of the Mandate over Syria that the League of Nations had entrusted to them (1920–46), the French razed the Cemetery of the Sufis in Damascus in order to construct a hospital in its place. Only the grave of Ibn Taymiyya was spared—the colonial power’s Syrian workers, it is related, having vehemently opposed its destruction. Paradoxes: while the Shaykh al-Islām was (according to the commonly held view³) an inveterate adversary of the mystics, it is precisely in the Cemetery of the Sufis that he was interred and, of this same necropolis, nothing more remains but his grave, as if to him alone had been entrusted the mission of perpetuating in death the memory of the spiritual masters among whom he had lain in rest for centuries...⁴

That said, the contrast between the tombs of the two great saints of the Syrian capital proves quite as astonishing.

The resting-place of Ibn ʿArabī is like the heart of the vibrant popular quarter that bears his name. In front of its entrance, a street seller walks about offering several of Ibn ʿArabī’s works, the authentic or apocryphal, theosophical or occult. The tomb of Ibn Taymiyya, lost in some rear courtyard of the maternity wing of Damascus University Hospital, is only accessible

¹ The leaves of a particular species of shrub called *sidra* were used as soap.

² IBN KATHĪR, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān li-l-Turāth, 1408/1998, 8 vols.), vol. xiv, p. 143.

³ One knows that the reality is in fact more complicated; see in particular Y. MICHOT, *Suivre Muhammad par amour de Dieu [Pages spirituelles d’Ibn Taymiyya XI]* in *Action* 38 (Port-Louis, Mauritius, Oct. 2000), pp. 10–11, 28; p. 10 n. 11. (Also accessible on the internet: www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/default.htm.)

⁴ In *Culte* (part 3), É. GEOFFROY points out that ‘this necropolis did not welcome only the *ṣūfiyya*’. The paradox is none the less astonishing for that.

after one has convinced the very officious guardians of the campus of one's good intentions. As for being able to purchase in the Syrian capital any, even the least, of his works—the odds are dead against it, even in the quality bookshops.



At the mausoleum of Ibn 'Arabī

Protected by a glass case recalling an English garden conservatory, the cenotaph of Ibn 'Arabī is presented to the piety of the people in the style of a Catholic relic. That of Ibn Taymiyya by contrast is surrounded by solid iron bars, as if the imprisonment to which he was condemned for the last two years of his life had not come to an end with his passing away.

Cradled by the murmur of the faithful who give their confidences to him by touching a hand to his glass screen, or who pray and read the Qur'ān by his side, the repose of the 'Shaykh al-akbar' seems as peaceful as one could wish. That of Ibn Taymiyya on the other hand is regularly troubled by the shrieks of women in labour. (And one remembers, by the way, that he remained unmarried...¹)



Ibn Taymiyya's grave, in the back-courtyard of a hospital

The light coming from the twelve windows in the drum of its lofty cupola or from ponderous lustres of crystal bathes the mausoleum of the Andalusian *walī*; it is reflected on the tiles of Ottoman ceramic and on the marble of the walls or on the glass framework of the imposing calligraphies affixed to them, before it is lost amid greenery of plants and bouquets of flowers and the motley colours of the rugs. On account of the screen formed by the bushes and shrubs growing wild around it, the sun's rays barely touch the sepulchre of Ibn Taymiyya. To be sure, this mini-jungle serves to hide in part the horrid concrete buildings of the hospital, with their air-conditioners fixed to the windows and their obtrusive pipework; but it also threatens the stability of the tomb, an acacia already pushing its roots between the stones of the plinth.

¹ See Y. MICHOT, *Un célibataire endurci et sa maman: Ibn Taymiyya (m. 728/1328) et les femmes*, in C. CANNUYER (ed.), *La femme dans les civilisations orientales* (Brussels: Société Belge d'Études Orientales, 'Acta Orientalia Belgica, XV', 2001), pp. 165–90. (Also accessible on the internet: www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/default.htm.)

Under the sometimes somnolent, sometimes interested eye of the beadle seated at his gate, Ibn ‘Arabī becomes the object of the focused emotions of those (male and female) who come to him and often, in the hope of benefiting from his *baraka*, leave an offering to him. Ranged against one side of the grill around Ibn Taymiyya’s grave there are a few blank, rusted metal cans which must have, at some point, served as pots for flowers that today are faded—only these bear witness that, now and again, some rare faithful visitors still call on the theologian for whose burial in 1328 the entire population of Damascus had turned out.¹

Rigour and the *via media*

Could Ibn Taymiyya be paying the price for certain doctrinal positions (improperly attributed to him) on the matter of visiting tombs, and for, more generally, his reputation as a dogmatic rigorist?

The opinion of the Mamlūk theologian on the *ziyāra* (visiting) of graves, including the grave of the Prophet in Madina, was the pretext for his incarceration in the citadel of Damascus from Sha‘bān 726/July 1326 until his death. The ardour with which he continued, even from prison, to debate this topic with the Mālikī chief qāḍī of Cairo, Taqī al-Dīn al-Ikhnā‘ī, led the sultan to order, in Jumāda II 728/April 1328, that his books, papers, inks and pens, be taken away from him. However, Ibn Kathīr clearly rejects the accusation that was laid against Ibn Taymiyya, according to which he had, in a fatwa written several years earlier, ‘made visiting the grave of the Prophet, may God pray over him and grant him peace, and those of the virtuous, may the prayers of God be upon them and His greeting of peace, an act of disobedience [to God], according to the consensus [of the learned], in an unequivocal manner.’ ‘Just look’, adds Ibn Kathīr, ‘at this falsification [perpetrated] against the Shaykh al-Islām! In his answer to this question [about visiting graves] there is no interdiction against visiting the graves of the Prophet and the virtuous [...] Rather, he considered it to be desirable and urged to it. His writings and his [own] explanations of the rites of the pilgrimage attest thereto [...] He did not invoke the consensus to forbid it, and he was not ignorant of the Messenger’s words: “Visit the graves! They will remind you of the hereafter.”’²

Besides that, there are numerous passages by the theologian himself which make his argument explicit. For example he wrote that visiting the grave of the Prophet is counted among ‘the most eminent of virtuous actions, and in none of my arguments, just as in none of the arguments of [scholars] other than me, is there any prohibition of that, nor any prohibition of what is Lawful (*shar‘ī*) in visiting the graves of the Prophets and the virtuous, nor of what is Lawful in visiting other graves. Rather, I have alluded elsewhere to the desirable

¹ In *Culte* (part 3), É. GEOFFROY writes about Ibn Taymiyya: ‘We know that his grave was visited at the beginning of the Ottoman epoch, which is confirmed by a hagiographical text of this period making of him a *walī*, to whom miracles are attributed. The grave still exists [...] but the Shaykh is no longer solicited; indeed, as a Damascene shaykh said to us: “The Sufis see in him an unbeliever (*kāfir*), and the *salafī* reformists [who have adopted his ideas] forbid themselves any pious visiting [of graves]...”’

² IBN KATHĪR, *Bidāya*, vol. xiv, p. 129, trans. in Y. MICHOT, *IBN TAYMIYYA. Les intermédiaires entre Dieu et l’homme (Risālat al-wāsiṭa bayna l-khalq wa-l-ḥaqq)* (Paris: A.E.I.F. Éditions, ‘Fetwas du Shaykh de l’Islām Ibn Taymiyya, I’, 1417/1996), pp. 12–13, n. 12. (Also accessible on the internet: www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/default.htm.)

character of visiting the graves, in just the same way as the Prophet, may God pray over him and grant him peace, used to visit the people [buried in] al-Baqī^c and the martyrs of Uhud.’



The cenotaph of Ibn Taymiyya

A Lawful visit is when the visitor’s objective is to invoke God for the dead person in just the same way as, through the prayer over his bier, one has as objective to invoke God for him. And to stand before his grave is of the [same] kind as to pray over him [...] Praying over the dead among the believers, and standing before their graves is reliant upon abundantly authenticated Tradition (*sunna mutawātira*). The Prophet, may God pray over him and grant him peace, used to pray over deceased Muslims and prescribed that to his community. [...] The visiting [of graves] that [by contrast] constitutes innovation is that by which one has as objective to make [diverse] requests of the dead person, or to appeal to him to invoke God and to intercede. Or yet, the objective is to invoke God beside his grave because the one who has this objective holds the opinion that [doing] this better assures that his [own] invocation will receive answer. A visiting done from these points of view is innovated. The Prophet, may God pray over him and grant him peace, did not prescribe it and the Companions did not practise it, neither beside the grave of the Prophet, may God pray over him and grant him peace, nor beside other graves. It is ascribable to the genus of associationism and the causes of associationism.’¹

‘How much the Nazarenes venerate the relics of their saints! It is not therefore far-fetched that they would suggest to certain ignorant Muslims that such and such a tomb is that of one whom the Muslims revere, in order that the latter should venerate it together with them. How would it not go thus when they have already misguided many ignorant Muslims! They have, in that, come [so far as] to baptize the children of the latter, claiming that that assures a long life for the child! They have also led them to visit the churches and the sanctuaries (*bī^ca*) that they venerate, many ignorant Muslims coming along to make their votive offerings (*nadhhr*) at the places that the Nazarenes venerate. Similarly, many of the ignorant among them have come so far as to visit the churches of the Nazarenes and to solicit the *baraka* of their priests, of their

¹ These different texts are also translated in Y. MICHOT, *Intermédiaires*, pp. 12–13, n. 12.

monks, etc. Those [Muslims] who venerate graves and the shrines of martyrs (*mashhad*) have a strong likeness to the Nazarenes.¹

As for dogmatic rigour: it is true that, over the centuries in different degrees, the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya have been found in every serious project to reform Islam. Yet, how can one hope to purify the religion of deviations and innovations without reminding people that the Straight Way, broad as it may be and capable of integrating many things, comprises boundaries that are not to be breached except on penalty of going astray and getting lost? Moreover, how can one encourage a *praxis mystica* by harmonizing the will with the divine imperative revealed to the Seal of the Messengers unless one also denounces the fatalism and resignation before the challenges of the age, the stagnation and the recourse to the imaginary? How, in the end, can one liberate people for the service of the only God if not by expelling the hucksters and charlatans from the Temple?

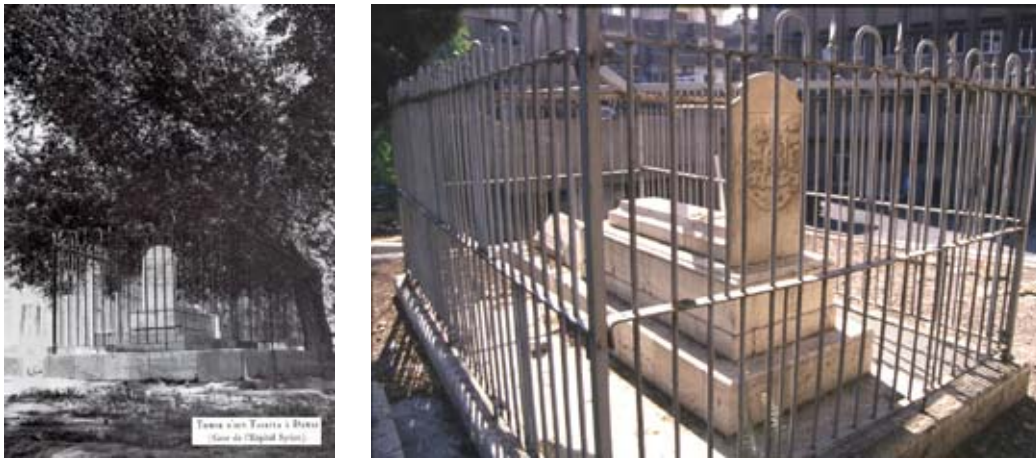
Faced with the ‘soft’ spirituality, the ‘user friendly’ religion and ‘New Age’ Islam of certain Sufi shaykhs haphazardly laying claim to the great masters of the past—and notably, often, to Ibn ‘Arabī—the Mamlūk theologian is bound to come across as the figurehead of a militant religion, of a ‘hard’ Islam. Whereas, at the White House, or in London, Rome or elsewhere, the red carpet is rolled out for fakirs, dervishes and other ‘compatible’ gurus, the name of Ibn Taymiyya is found, along with the other usual suspects, in the *9/11 Commission Report* and on various black lists of the ‘struggle of the civilized world against the Islamist terrorist Internationale’. As if he had ever understood or taught Islam otherwise than as a *via media*, a just mean far removed from any extremism...²

Profanation and dignity

At the mausoleum of Ibn ‘Arabī, the atmosphere as much as the stones attest the great extent to which, in our troubled epoch, ‘the greatest shaykh’ remains in good odour of sainthood. The despoliation and isolation of the grave of Ibn Taymiyya, the dilapidation and ugliness of its surroundings, would seem to indicate the reverse—an implacable will to humiliate, to mistreat and to exclude, even in death, a disturbing voice from the margins, a long-standing dissident, an irredeemable pariah. Under certain views, the wild greenery that is invading it, and the iron bars that enclose it, can give it the distressing look of a Guantanamo-esque cell... And as if the punishment had not yet been severe enough, or in order definitively to break a name, the greater part of the headstone indicating the identity of the Mamlūk Shaykh al-Islām today lies in pieces beside his cenotaph.

¹ Passage from *Majmū‘ al-fatāwā*, trans. in Y. MICHOT, *Ambiguïtés et limites de l’interreligieux* [Pages spirituelles d’Ibn Taymiyya, XXI], in *Action* 61 (Port-Louis, Mauritius, Oct. 2002), pp. 22–23. (Also accessible on the internet: www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/default.htm.)

² See Y. MICHOT, *IBN TAYMIYYA. Mardin: Hégire, fuite du péché et demeure de l’Islam*. Textes traduits de l’arabe, annotés et présentés en relation à certains textes modernes. Préface de James PISCATORI (Beirut: Albouraq, ‘Fetwas d’Ibn Taymiyya, 4’, 1425/2004); English trans. *Muslims under non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006); *IBN TAYMIYYA. Mécréance et pardon*. Textes traduits de l’arabe, introduits et annotés (Beirut: Albouraq, ‘Écrits spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya, 2’, 1426/2005); *Ibn Taymiyya et le mythe du grand méchant barbu, entre islamisme mongolisant et mauvais orientalisme*, 14 September 2005, on the internet: www.saphirnet.info/article_1790.html.



The grave of Ibn Taymiyya, before the 1939–45 war and in 1994

I found myself at the grave of Ibn Taymiyya for the first time about a dozen years ago. At that time I was not able to discover its location except after going through many laborious steps—I experienced the more joy for that when able to recite the *Fātiḥa* for his soul. A tall slab, some centimetres thick, erected at the head of a simple stepped cenotaph of relatively recent construction, indicated soberly but clearly, in elegant Arabic calligraphy sculpted in relief on a recessed field, the title and name of the deceased, as also the year of his death according to the *Hijrī* calendar: ‘the Shaykh al-Islām Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya, 728’.

That was very much the grave and the stela, the photograph of which Henri Laoust published in 1939,¹ except that the great tree that had been giving it shade in his time had disappeared, that used medical apparatus, old plastic sandals and other refuse were littering the immediate area, and that a vertical crack had opened from the middle of the top of the headstone down to the first line of the funerary inscription.

When, this summer of 2006, I came back to the tomb of the Mamlūk Shaykh al-Islām, only the lower third of this headstone was still in place with, as the only vestige of its inscription: ‘...l-Dīn... Taymiyya, 728’. As for the missing part, one needed only to lean forward and put a hand through the bars to pick up the fragments from the ground. Cruel working of time and the elements? Deliberate profanation by Aḥbāsh militants, by radical anti-salafis, by firebrands from the range of sects and movements, whose resentment Ibn Taymiyya had attracted by his puritanism, or—why not?—by uncompromising Wahhābīs? God alone knows.

In a little over a year, at the end of November 2007, the 20th of Dhū l-Qa‘da 1428 will mark the seventh centenary of the death of Ibn Taymiyya. On this occasion as on any other it would be quite absurd to erect for him any sort of shrine—of which, not to mention the sanctuary of Ibn ‘Arabī, Damascus surely already has a sufficient number! Yet, is it too much to ask and hope that henceforth a minimum of respect be accorded to his sepulchre, among other things by restoration of its funerary stela and regular upkeep of the place? Controversial as he may still seem in the eyes of some, the Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya remains one of the principal scholar-theologians of medieval Damascus. Whereas the infidel colonizer spared his

¹ H. LAOUST, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taqī-d-Dīn Ahmad b. Taymīya* (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, ‘Recherches d’archéologie, de philologie et d’histoire, IX’, 1939), plate II.

grave, how can it be that Syria would not be concerned to dignify the memory of one of the most eminent of its own children?



The funerary stela of Ibn Taymiyya, in 1994 and in August 2006

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