

The Pilgrimage to Mecca: Journey, Landscapes, and Naturalistic Observations in the Account of Sakine Soltān

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Abstract This essay examines the 1899 pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken by Sakine Soltān Vaqār od-Dowle, widow of Nāṣer ed-Din Shāh, and explores how she recorded her extensive travels through Shiite shrines in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and Persia by 1901. Her writings offer rare insights into Muslim female mobility and self-representation.

Keywords Qajar dynasty. Travel account. Hajj. Landscape. Iranian women.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 “I write to remember as long as I live”. – 3 Beyond the Pilgrimage. – 4 Humanised Landscapes. – 5 Final Words.

1 Introduction

Muslim women's literature is intricately woven with a subtle thread that links storytelling to the act of remaining unseen.¹ It offers a discreet yet persistent form of revelation, a veiled current running through the pages that steadily bridges the gap between lived experience and the stereotypical images that overshadow the female world. These images are often distorted, shaped by traditional Western perspectives that long claimed authority to narrate the

¹ Milani 1992, 1-16; Vanzan 2009; Karami 2022a; 2022b.

Muslim woman without ever truly knowing her.² Along this delicate line, narration becomes a space of presence: a site where women observe and choose, guided by their own rhythms and vocabulary. Exploring the journeys of Muslim women thus means venturing into a relatively uncharted field. Only recently have scholars and the wider public begun to focus on Muslim female travellers, witnesses and protagonists of a movement that is at once physical, intellectual, and symbolic.³

In classical Persian literature, women's presence in travel narratives is not entirely absent. Occasionally, they appear in texts that blend literary ambition with the intention to provide information (*safarnāme*, literally 'book of travel'). Yet these appearances are almost always filtered through the male gaze, recounted by authors external to their experience. Authentic female travel narratives begin to emerge only around the eighteenth century,⁴ when literary expression was joined by the act of crossing the threshold of the domestic sphere. Among the motivations enabling this transition, the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) stands out. As one of the five pillars of Islam, it is an obligation for every Muslim, man or woman, who is financially and physically able to do so, to perform it at least once in their lifetime. Notably, women undertaking these journeys committed their experiences to writing, revealing realities that transcend the theoretically mandated presence of a guardian, whether father, husband, or brother. While such characters sometimes appear, they are relegated to the background, overshadowed by female protagonism asserting itself independently. Women thus emerge as essentially autonomous narrators of the spaces they traverse, recounting their journeys from their own perspectives.

This essay examines the pilgrimage account of Sakine Soltān Vāqār od-Dowle, widow of Nāṣer ed-Din Shāh (reigned 1848–96). The text reveals that in 1899, although remarried, Sakine Soltān was still residing at the royal court. In this context, she sought permission to undertake the pilgrimage from her late husband's successor, Mozaffar ed-Din Shāh (reigned 1896–1907). Few biographical details about her survive. Her maternal origins can be traced to Esfahan.⁵ Sakine Soltān herself composed two extant travelogues: the account

2 It is important to note that stereotyped representations often originate from a male perspective. By contrast, European female travellers have generally shown greater sensitivity in capturing the nuances of their counterparts' daily lives. Cf. Ciafardoni 2021.

3 For example, Khosravie 2013; Mahallati 2016; Karami 2017; 2019; Bachtin 2020; Lambert-Hurley 2022; Karami 2023; Bachtin 2023; Karami 2025.

4 An eighteenth-century pilgrimage account in verse by a female traveller survives, cf. Alam 2009, 24–32; Lambert-Hurley 2022, 49–57.

5 Sakine Soltān Vāqār od-Dowle 1384/2005, 97.

under examination in this study, and a second narrative describing a journey to Shiraz in 1905, undertaken in the company of her second husband, Mirzā Esmā'il Khān Mo'taṣem ol-Molk Āṣtiyāni.⁶ She also composed poetry, signing it with the first part of her title, *Vaqār*.

It is likely that her interest in travel writing was influenced by her first husband, Nāṣer ed-Din Shāh, renowned for his journeys across Europe and Iran and for leaving behind several travel accounts. However, the immediate impetus for writing the pilgrimage diary appears to have come from another widow of the Shāh, Delbar Khānum, who, before departing, asked Sakine Soltān: "In the name of those you wish to honour [in Iraq], I ask you to record in detail all your expenses during this journey and to inform us" (159).⁷

Their first destination was Iraq, where they intended to visit the shrines of the Shia imams in Kazimayn, Karbala, and Najaf. After a stay of about two months, she continued with her brother and staff toward Aleppo and Alexandretta. From there, they boarded a ship that stopped in Beirut and Port Said, passed through the Suez Canal, and eventually reached Jeddah. In April 1900, she finally arrived in Mecca and performed the *hajj*. The journey then proceeded overland northward: she visited Medina, crossed the Nefud desert, ascended through the northern regions of the Arabian Peninsula, and eventually returned to Iraq. There she made further visits to the Shia shrines of Najaf, Karbala, Kazimayn, and Samarra. Returning to Persia at the end of August 1900, she travelled first to Borujerd in western Iran to join her husband, who was engaged in a government mission, and only later returned to Tehran in March 1901.

2 "I write to remember as long as I live"

When reflecting on the pilgrimage to Mecca, what first catches one's attention is the profound significance of the journey itself. The movement of large groups of people toward a single destination – each taking different routes over short or medium distances – constitutes a defining feature of the pilgrimage experience. Each day follows a strict schedule, with all pilgrims required to arrive by the seventh day of the last month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The itinerary must address practical challenges: securing water for both people and animals, obtaining forage and provisions, and managing adverse

⁶ Her second husband was an official who held various posts, ranging from head of the arsenal in Shiraz to administrator of the Persian consulate in Ashgabat. Cf. Momtahen od-Dowle Shaqāqi 1365/1986, 139.

⁷ All quotations are taken from the transcription by Sakine Soltān *Vaqār* od-Dowle (1389/2010) edited by Ja'fariyān and Kiyāni Haft Lang. The autograph manuscript is preserved in a private collection.

weather conditions that often cause delays. Modes of transportation vary according to economic means, social status, and above all the nature of the route. Each detail demands careful planning to ensure timely arrival. Travel options include horses, mules, and camels; alternatively, palanquins carried by pack animals or paired seats mounted on either side of a mule or camel – known as *howdaj*, *shakdaf*, or *kajāve*, depending on their design and materials – were common. Regional stagecoaches such as the '*araba* (Arabic) and the *delījān* (Persian) also circulated,⁸ as did carts. For crossing rivers or seas, pilgrims relied on ships (*keshti*), lifeboats, or small riverboats.

The journey required numerous stops, highlighting both its duration and the precision of planning needed to maintain the schedule. The landscape descriptions in the narrative attest to the author's keen eye for the natural world. Her portrayals are measured, sometimes enriched with subtle allusions that suggest impressions beyond simple visual recording. Yet, most remain firmly grounded in the tangible reality of what she saw. Although the journey is a pilgrimage, her gaze alternates between land and sky, while remaining attentive to practical detail. At times, the landscape resonates with cultural associations unique to her perspective; nevertheless, she repeatedly underscores her primary aim: to document what she had until then neither seen nor heard. Writing becomes a way to preserve these experiences, imprinting the images of her journey on the memory of her contemporaries. For instance, on Friday, 14 Jomādi os-Şāni 1317 (October 20, 1899), when the author's group departed from Kangāvar, she noted:

After three hours of walking, we arrived at a water spring [...]. This was followed by a gradual ascent and then a steep descent. Despite this, the path remained easy, and six hours after dawn, we reached Şahne, a place renowned for its gardens and springs. A large river flows through it, adding to its charm and making it a delightful spot. (38)

The landscape framing the route emerges as the author's favoured subject. At times, she recounts scenes relayed through her brother's observations. For instance, she describes the Achaemenid rock inscriptions at Mount Bisotun not from direct experience but by quoting his account, as he viewed the remains from a distance using binoculars (40). Elsewhere, she recalls crossing a mountain pass

8 The '*araba* was a general term for wheeled vehicles, encompassing everything from simple carts to large covered carriages. In Qajar Iran, it commonly denoted spacious wagons or stagecoaches, occasionally adapted for long-distance passenger travel. By contrast, the *delījān*, a borrowing from the French diligence, designated a nineteenth-century stagecoach introduced to Iran under European influence.

toward Hārunābād in the Kurdish region of Persia – a descent so steep and smooth that it caused the horse's shoes to break (41). The term employed, *na'l-shekan* (literally 'breaks the horseshoe'), recurs in travel diaries to denote narrow, slippery passes with treacherous hairpin turns.

Her naturalistic and agricultural observations are usually brief. "In these days we saw many cows used for ploughing" (42), she notes while travelling through the Iranian Kurdish region – an observation that also underscores the reliance of wheat cultivation on rainfall irrigation. During the return journey, on the stretch from Hārunābād to Māhidasht, dated 6 Rabi' ol-Avvāl 1318 (September 1, 1900), she observes:

All agriculture is devoted to wheat cultivation under dry farming conditions. As far as the eye can see, there are vast wheat fields, thanks be to God. Numerous rice paddies were also observed. (135)

On the road to Kerend-e Gharb, she remarks: "I saw many hyacinths" (54). Near Patagh, close to the Iraqi border, she writes: "There are forests of large and small oaks. In three or four places, water springs were seen" (43). At moments, Sakine Soltān adopts a more poetic register, weaving figurative imagery into her descriptions of the natural world. On the way to Sarpol-e Zahāb, she reflects:

We crossed a wheat field that ended between two mountains so close together it seemed they were whispering to each other. The pilgrims, curious, walked between them, interrupting their quiet conversation. I, too, eavesdropped as I passed and heard them say, 'the field behind me is the most beautiful'. When I moved beyond them, I saw that the most beautiful field lay behind the second mountain. (44)

Again, marching toward Khānaqayn in Iraq, in the village of Qal'e Sabzi, she comments:

The surrounding mountains, barren and without any vegetation, resembled leavened dough. I could not understand why this dusty village was named Qal'e Sabzi [literally 'green fortress']. After some time, the palm groves of Khānaqayn came into view. (45)

Along the Euphrates River, between Al-Baghdadiyya and 'Ānah, she turns once again to metaphor, portraying the natural scene with striking anthropomorphic imagery:

The entire route was green, lush, and bursting with flowers; in some areas, the vegetation was sparse, resembling the light beard of young Arab men, while in others it was dense, like that of Iranians. (64)

Wooded landscapes in particular draw her attention. On March 7, 1900, as the group entered the Aleppo region on their way to Aş-Şālihiyah, she notes:

The entire path meandered through a forest of trees, including tamarisks and, in certain areas, junipers. It brought to mind the boxwood forests of Māzandarān [in the Caspian region of Persia]. Compared to earlier days, there were fewer flowers in bloom. (68)

The memory of places and past journeys, likely shared with her late husband, emerges repeatedly, particularly through the motif of the tree. When approaching Aleppo, she sees a lush grove that resembles palm trees, though her brother suggests they might be olives, later confirmed (76). She also remarks on cultivation: "The plain was ploughed with machinery (*māshin*) and wheat had been planted", with irrigation again relying on dry farming (76). The theme reappears en route to 'Ānah in Iraq:

The road meandered through a hilly valley, surrounded by cultivated fields. A water wheel had been set up to draw water from the Euphrates River, irrigating the nearby lands. Despite the extensive cultivation, no people were seen along the route. (65)

Alongside these agricultural observations, the floral landscape draws her attention: "Certain purple flowers grow among the wheat" (73). On March 19, while traveling from Aleppo toward Alexandretta, she describes:

Lilies and mulleins, along with many other flowers [...]. A notable feature of these lands is the abundance of villages. The road stretched for six parasangs. We forded a wide river, so deep that the bottom of the palanquin was submerged in water. In some places, the Arabs, our guides, stood in the middle of the watercourse, assisting people as they crossed. Thanks be to God, we crossed this stretch without any problems. Today, from a distance, a mountain came into view, its base bordered by a vast expanse of water, while its peak was capped with snow. We witnessed sights never seen before. (77)

On the following day, March 20, she approached this vast body of water, pausing to watch the rippling waves and "flocks of ducks,

along with other birds, diving into it" (78). At its centre stood a stone bridge approximately a quarter of a parasang in length. At the foot of the mountain lay a village nearly as large as a city, "from which a river flowed" (78). Although she does not explicitly name the valley, her description suggests the Amuq Plain, with its ancient Lake of Antioch - drained in the latter half of the twentieth century - crossed by the Orontes River.⁹ This road toward the Amuq plain functioned as a key convergence point for several routes.¹⁰

3 Beyond the Pilgrimage

During the sea crossing, Sakine Solṭān remained in the ship's cabin, recording only a few impressions, primarily concerning the unhealthy conditions on board. She notes in particular the irritating presence of lice: "On this ship, there are so many lice moving in a line, one after another, just like ants" (89). Upon arriving at the port of Jeddah, her attention turned to practical matters. Along the route to Mecca, travellers were obliged to pay not only for water but also for the space required to set up tents for the night (92).

The pilgrimage to Mecca and the subsequent visit to the Prophet's tomb in Medina are described mainly in relation to religious rituals and visits to the tombs of prominent Islamic figures. Yet her notes also preserve valuable observations on the natural environment and climate: the presence of a water reservoir (*birka*) (95), mention of the hot *sām* wind (100), the location of a spring (104), and the price of water (104). Departure from Medina took place on 18 Moharram 1318 (May 18, 1900), heading northeast. The following days were marked by alternating extremes: relentless heat, scarcity of water, and long stretches of oppressive stillness occasionally broken by brief moments of relief. On the 24th of the month (May 24, 1900), she remarked: "In these deserts there is nothing but thorny acacias (*khār-e mojilān*). There is no water" (108). The landscape appears monotonous, its rhythm dictated by distances covered and the quality of water sources encountered. Yet within this desolation she occasionally singles out unexpected details: "The thorny grasses of this deserted plain are still green. There are many yarrow flowers, *Achillea millefolium* (*bumādarān*)" (109). This observation was made while traveling from Mustajiddah toward the Jabal region. From there, the author continued toward Najaf with stopovers at other Iraqi cities housing the tombs of Shiite imams, before returning to Persia. In this later stage of the narrative, the emphasis shifts to encounters

⁹ Wilkinson 2003, 146-8; Wilkinson 2011, 135-51; De Giorgi 2021.

¹⁰ De Giorgi 2021.

with people and visits to shrines, while personal remarks on the landscape become increasingly rare, a change the author herself acknowledges, having already explored such observations more fully in the earlier phases of the journey.

4 Humanised Landscapes

Capturing the perspective of a traveller who lingers in each place only briefly, sometimes for a single night, at other times merely for a few hours to perform prayer, is a challenging task. Urban landscapes and humanised environments pass swiftly, leaving behind only fragmented impressions, fleeting glimpses of her experience. Throughout the Persian territory, from Tehran to the border with Iraq, Sakine Soltān consistently conceals both her identity and her ties to the court. When confronted with the insistent questions of women she occasionally meets in cities or in *hammāms*, she deliberately provides fabricated answers (36).

Her stance toward others is often uncompromising. Caravan leaders, who change from one stage of the journey to another, are portrayed without leniency. She depicts them as "greedy", "ignorant", even "despicable", at one point branding them "rat eaters". Positive adjectives such as "beautiful" and "clean" are reserved solely for the women, men, and children of Aleppo, while the term "kind" is applied only to certain women encountered in Iraqi cities on the return journey. Overall, her characterisations of individuals lack nuance and are conveyed in an almost unyielding tone. Her encounters with others appear less to challenge her identity than to reinforce it, so much so that her bigotry often comes across as severe. A revealing episode occurs upon her arriving in Kerend-e Gharb, in Persia, where she remarks:

Since the inhabitants of Kerend-e Gharb are reported to follow the 'Ali-illāhi religion,¹¹ I did not allow the servants to buy anything there. I was even hesitant to eat the bread they offered. (43)

In general, Sakine Soltān draws a sharp line between herself, as a Shiite, and those who are Sunni. Her sense of identity seems less influenced by formal rules or objective criteria than by continuous encounters with difference and the persistent need to reaffirm her own viewpoint.

¹¹ A mystical religious minority derived from Islam, known as Yāresānism (or *Ahl-e Haqq*). Cf. Hamzeh'ee 1990.

5 Final Words

Sakine Soltān's travel account is situated at the close of the nineteenth century, a period poised on the threshold of profound transformation. Only a few years later, in 1905, the Qajar dynasty, ruling since 1794, would enter a phase of decline, initiating an uncertain trajectory toward constitutional monarchy, a project interrupted just two decades later.¹² Persia was stepping into a new era, and in light of political developments that continue to shape the country today, examining the roles of women in past societies acquires renewed significance. Restoring women's presence within historical narratives allows us to recover voices often consigned to invisibility, voices that, with striking clarity, particularly in more recent times, recognised and at times challenged the subordinate status imposed upon them.

In her diary, Sakine Soltān observes how her will is consistently disregarded solely because she is a woman, her brother's authority taking precedence over her own (90, 107). In this sense, both travel and daily life become acts of writing: gestures of communication from one woman to a broader community of women. In the closing pages, Sakine Soltān fulfills a promise made to another woman at court by meticulously recording the expenses incurred during the pilgrimage. Despite occasional repetitions and redundancies, her notes – on distances travelled, rainfall patterns, water quality, and countless other details – offer invaluable material for understanding not only the practicalities of travel but also the specific difficulties that marked the late nineteenth century.

We cannot know what Sakine Soltān would think of today's rapid flights arriving in Jeddah, the luxury hotels, or the comfort of air-conditioned transport providing fresh water along the route to Mecca. Yet one thing remains unchanged: although modern pilgrims have lost their direct encounter with the natural landscape, the economic burdens of the journey endure. A reality that has remained largely constant over time.

12 Abrahamian 1982, 50-101.

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