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Iranian Pilgrimage to the Shi‘ite Sacred Sites of the ‘Atabat in the Nineteenth Century. (in Japanese)

Summary
After the founding of the Safavid dynasty in the early 16th century, the Shi‘ite faith began to take firm root among the populace of Iran. As is obvious from the current situation in which 90% of the population is Shi‘a, Iranian history has followed a different course from those of other Islamic societies. In the course of this history, the era of the Qajar dynasty (1796-1925), was a period during which the Shi‘ite faith grew in strength. This is represented by both the increasing influence of Shi‘ite scholars of Islamic jurisprudence and, most clearly, by the fact that the ta‘zīya, the ritual of mourning for Imam Husain, was conducted increasingly elaborately in Iran. Nevertheless, the expression of Shi‘ite faith that is characterized by reverence and adoration of the Imams is also seen in the distinct act of pilgrimage to the tombs (ziyara) of the Imams. Although the 19th century was an age when great numbers of Iranians set off on pilgrimages to the tombs of the Imams, this historical reality has been overlooked.

In addition to Mecca and Medina, sites sacred to all Muslims, there are for the Shi‘a many other holy places. These sites are the tombs and shrines for successive Imams and their offspring. The major Imam-associated tombs at Mashhad and Qom and the majority of Imamzadas are located within Iran, and one can frequently see even today pilgrimages to these sites. On the other hand, outside Iran there existed, and still exist, sacred Shi‘ite sites. In Iraq, there are four Shi‘ite shrine cities, Najaf Karbala, Kazimayn and Samarra. These cities are generally called ‘Atabat, which means “thresholds.” Najaf where the first Imam, ‘Ali, was interred, Karbala, where the third Imam, Husain, was martyred, Kazimayn, near Baghdad, where the tombs of the sev-
enth Imam, Musa al-Kazim, and ninth Imam, Muhammad al-Javad, are located, and Samarra, where the tombs of the 10th Imam, 'Ali al-Hadi, and the 11th Imam, Hasan al-'Askari, are found and where the 12th Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into occultation. Among these Imams' tombs, it was pilgrimage to the tomb of Husain in Karbala that became "the religious duty of the Shi'ite faithful," and conducting such a pilgrimage was considered to be creating a "covenant with the Imam" and then to have significance for them no less than that of the pilgrimage to Mecca itself. Nineteenth-century Iranians sought to reach the 'Atabat, which were for them the "most sacred sites." They journeyed for up to 1,000 kilometers, across the border with Iraq, which was then under Ottoman rule.

The purpose of this study is to trace and examine the pilgrimage to the 'Atabat by Iranians in the nineteenth century. In this century, this flow of pilgrims reached its zenith. The number of Iranian pilgrims to the 'Atabat was around one hundred thousand per year, that was one percent of the population.

The principle historical sources used in this study are the travel accounts (safarnama) written in Persian by Iranians of the Qajar dynasty and other travel records in Ottoman, European and Japanese languages. These first-person accounts excel in recounting how the journeys were carried out, and what their authors witnessed and felt. Additionally, diplomatic documents exchanged between the Ottoman and Iranian governments, written records from the Baghdad provincial government to the Ottoman court in Istanbul, reports to government offices, and internal government documents are valuable sources conveying the position of the Iranian pilgrims to the 'Atabat at the time as well as the Ottoman government's response to them. The majority of the source materials used in this study, including the travel accounts, has seldom been employed previously.

In the First section of this study, I examine the historical background of the nineteenth-century flourishing of the pilgrimages by Iranians in terms of the relationship between Iran and the Ottomans. Behind the increase in the number of pilgrims to the 'Atabat was the improvement in the relations between Iran and the Ottomans. Iranian dynasties from the Safavids to the Qajars, which espoused the Shi'ite faith, and the Sunni Ottoman state had been at loggerheads since the 16th century onward, but this period was an age when the regimes were at times able to overcome their differences and work hand in hand. By surveying the several treaties of peace concluded by the Ottoman dynasty and Iran, it becomes clear that securing safe passage for Iranian pilgrims to sacred sites in the hands of the Ottomans was a serious issue. The two treaties concluded between the Ottoman dynasty and Qajar Iran in the first half of the 19th century...
were based on the precedents of former dynasties, seeking protection for Iranian pilgrims on the Hajj to Mecca and journeying to the ‘Atabat. The Ottoman dynasty which controlled these sacred sites consistently acceded to these demands. The second treaty of Erzurum, concluded in 1847, was the most important treaty of those concluded between Iran and the Ottomans, and its seventh article guaranteed safe passage for pilgrims to the ‘Atabat. With this treaty as a guarantee and the improvement of the routes, one-hundred thousand Iranian pilgrims set out for the ‘Atabat each year.

Although large numbers of Iranian pilgrims journeyed to the ‘Atabat, there has hardly been any consideration of the historical reality of the pilgrimage. In order to understand the ‘Atabat pilgrimage, contemporary travel accounts written in Persian are the most valuable historical sources. Many travel accounts were composed by Iranians in the 19th century, and among these are several extant works titled “Safarnama-ye ‘Atabat.” In the second section of this study, I examine historical circumstances of pilgrimages to the ‘Atabat based chiefly on these accounts. Historical circumstances of pilgrimages to the ‘Atabat will be summarized as follows: pilgrims, most of them were traveling by foot, and people of high society rode on horse, and women were usually sitting in the sedan chair. For the most part, they gathered and formed groups to travel overland to their destinations, not travel alone. Additionally in order to avoid the heat of the Iraqi summer, pilgrims would depart Iran in the autumn, taking few notices to the Shi’ite rituals of ‘Ashura and Arba’in. And the one-way journey from Iran to Iraq would require approximately one month. Also, in order to visit the four Iraqi holy sites of Najaf, Karbala, Kazimayn and Samarra, at least one additional month was required because of the distance of these sites and the way to travel by foot. Moreover, Iranian pilgrims did not immediately resume their journeys after having completed one leg of a pilgrimage; their itineraries often included a sojourn of a few days, and even to a few weeks particularly in Karbala and Najaf. So, their stay in Iraq might last from two to three months in length. For these reasons, these journeys, from time of departure to that of return, might have lasted nearly half a year, and their relatively lengthy nature of staying at holy sites was a chief characteristic of the pilgrimages to the ‘Atabat and it cost almost an annual income according to their status.

In Iraq, pilgrims would begin with a visit to Kazimayn on the outskirts of Baghdad and later travel to Karbala and Najaf in the south, and Samarra in the north. Neglecting pilgrimage to all four holy sites was rare and this point is different with those of Indian Seventh Imamiya Shi’is. Additionally, pilgrims would make excursions to Kufa, and also travel down the Tigris from Baghdad to make a pilgrimage.
to the tomb of Salman-i Farsi in Mada'in. Besides of these sites, along the pilgrimage routes, they also visited historical and religious sites associated with the Imams and the graves of their family members. In contrast, although there are many other sacred tombs of holy men in Iraq, such as those of Sunni, Sufi saints and Jewish graves, obviously, these are not associated with the Shi'ite Imams, therefore Iranian pilgrims clearly distinguished them as not being objects of pilgrimage. For this reason, even if they fervently made pilgrimages to the tombs of the Imams as we see pilgrims visit shrines every day during their stay, and appeared to be particularly devout believers, it is clear that their orientation was toward the Shi'ite sect alone. Furthermore, because they stayed for a relatively long period of time at the sites of the 'Atabat, their activities were not confined to the religious act of pilgrimage and extended to such secular activities as meetings, site-seeing or hunting, commerce, and temporal marriage of sigha during their stay. Due to this fact, the pilgrimage to the 'Atabat was for the Iranian pilgrims a sacred journey that had dual aspects of faith and recreation.

However, the pilgrimage to the 'Atabat was never a simple matter for the Iranian pilgrims. The cause of their difficulties was the fact that the 'Atabat was not located in Iran but in a "foreign land" under the control of the Sunni Ottomans. In the third section of this study, I focus on its negative aspects of the journey faced by the Iranian pilgrims. The greatest problem was security in Iraq. The Ottoman dynasty had just reaffirmed its control of Iraq in the 1830's, and yet much of the nomadic Arab and Kurdish tribes were never fully placed under Ottoman control. Then, the caravans of the pilgrims were often attacked for their wealth. Through the 19th century, there are so many diplomatic and internal documents reported of the pilgrim attacking. This was the reason that security in Iraq was the major concern of pilgrims to the 'Atabat and then the Iranian government. Pilgrims and the Iranian consuls in Baghdad regularly appealed to the Ottoman and Iranian governments to maintain safety on the routes and they have to take measures for self-defense whole the way.

The 19th century was, in addition, the age during which the European powers applied pressure on many regions of the world in the form of "modernization," and various problems arose for the pilgrims as a result of this "modernization." The speed of process of modernization differed in the Ottoman empire and Iran; the Ottomans invariably took the lead leaving Iran a few steps behind the pace. This was particularly the case in the realm of the government, but from the point of view of the pilgrims, "modernization," that is, a new system of passports (tazkira), custom clearance (gumruk), and quarantines, was nothing more than the restrictions of the state. For the pil-
pilgrims who were not sufficiently conscious of the differences between their native and the foreign land and faced these systems at the border for the first time, these appeared merely as obstacles in their path. It was required for them to stay 5 days, or even some weeks at the quarantines of the border of Iraq. Looked at in another way, from the point of view of the effect on pilgrims, the aspects of the system imposed by the state probably inspired a certain sense of national consciousness (milliyat) in the pilgrims confronted by them when entering a foreign land.

The nearly one-hundred thousand pilgrims each year were a precious source of revenue for the Ottoman government, bringing in great wealth in the forms of the expense of the sojourn in Iraq and the various categories of tax collected. For example, revenue from Iranian pilgrims was estimated at around 2 million toman per year and the Baghdad provincial government also recognized the importance of Iranian pilgrims from the financial point of view. One may surmise that this is the main reason for the Ottoman government’s protection of the pilgrims to the ‘Atabat.

What drove so many Iranians to make the arduous pilgrimage to the ‘Atabat? In the fourth section of this study, I elucidate from various standpoints the sacred nature possessed by the holy ‘Atabat sites. Firstly, in terms of doctrines, the ‘Atabat pilgrimage was encouraged by Shi‘ite scholars. They simultaneously propounded the belief that “pilgrimage to the Imams’ tombs was a religious duty” and that there was much “spiritual merit (thawab)” to be attained in the pilgrimage as same as Hajj to Mecca, such as intercession (shifa’a) and achievement of his desire (istijaba al-dhia’a). It is these merits that can be seen as the magnetic force that attracted the Shi‘ite pilgrims to the ‘Atabat.

The pilgrimage to the ‘Atabat premised on such doctrine was not confined simply to living Iranian Shi‘is, the deceased were also promised benefit in the next life. The numbers involved in transfer of corpse (naqil al-jana‘iz) to the ‘Atabat increased in accordance with the numbers of living pilgrims, and this phenomenon became most prominent in the latter half of the 19th century. In this period, around 10,000 bodies from Iran were carried and buried in the ‘Atabat. It graphically illustrates the fervent desire of the contemporary Iranian Shi‘ite faithful to visit the ‘Atabat. Remains of the deceased believers were carried to the sacred sites, where they were interred at a cost, varying with the distance of their resting place from the tomb of the Imam. Sometimes only the remains were transported for burial, but at other times bodies of the recently deceased were brought, and in these cases the bodies as a source of contagion became a problem for the Ottoman government. In contrast, the cost of the burial plot and the tax imposed on the remains of the deceased were
also valuable sources of revenue for the Ottoman government, as were the living pilgrims.

What were the ‘Atabat, the objects of devotion of the Iranian Shi‘a? Examining the impressions of Iranian pilgrims, Ottoman government officials and Western travelers about the ‘Atabat, I make clear in conclusion that the ‘Atabat in the 19th century were sites of extreme religious frenzy due to the great numbers of Iranian and other Shi‘ite pilgrims and residents. For the Ottoman government, these Shi‘ite holy places were sites of politically unrest that would not conform to the will of the political center. On the other hand, for the Shi‘a of Iran they were refuges where it was possible to act freely without precautionary disimulation (taqiya).

It is difficult to give a concrete account of the political and social importance of the ‘Atabat pilgrimage. However, given the very fact that 100,000 pilgrims annually overcame national borders and various difficulties to conduct a pilgrimage, and from the act of traveling as a group and the fact that there might at times be the body of a deceased person transported from Iran in the group, the pilgrimage to the ‘Atabat, which served as Shi‘ite “paradises” scattered enclaves within the Sunni regime, undoubtedly engendered in the pilgrims a great sense of accomplishment and exaltation. And it is in this very sense, the spiritual world of the Iranians who adhered to the Shi‘ite faith, that is, devotion to the Imams, and an aspect of Iranian society becomes visible in the pilgrimage to the ‘Atabat, as opposed to the pilgrimage to Mecca, the duty of all Muslims.

Following the dawn of the 20th century, the Ottoman dynasty collapsed and a new regime was formed in Iraq; while in Iran, the regime of the Qajar dynasty was replaced by that of the Pahlavi. Politically, the ‘Atabat pilgrimage came under the jurisdiction of nation states whose governments realized its political and economical benefit. In addition, as a result of technological advances in modern transport, the ‘Atabat pilgrimage lost its former momentum. Viewing these historical changes, it can be said that despite the constrictions of modernization and the nation state, people still found liberty in the 19th-century ‘Atabat pilgrimage, and it was, furthermore, the product of an age of passionate faith and an act that embodied the fervent devotion of the Shi‘ite faithful of Iran toward the Imams.

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