

Part A: Demolition of the Shrines

The Bani Asad had helped Imam Zainul Aabidin (a.s.) in burying the martyrs. Imam Zainul Aabidin (a.s.) foretold, “In this land of Karbala, the shrine of Imam Husayn (a.s.) will become a beacon of perpetual guidance. Centuries will pass but the grace flowing from Husayn’s shrine will continue unabated. The misguided leaders of recanting disbelievers will spare no effort to destroy and obliterate every sign and memory of the shrine, but every one of their malicious attempt will only augment the glory of the shrine.”

History is witness to the fact that no less than eight times, if not seventeen times, the shrine of Imam Husayn (a.s.) was completely destroyed only to come up in a larger and more glorious structure. The Umayyads and the Abbasids spared no effort to prevent people from visiting the shrine. Every such restriction only brought more and more determined pilgrims. We give below a short account of these incidents.

Now, within a few years after Ashura, for the first time the Banu Asad constructed a small structure over the graves and a mosque nearby. The Umayyads however established police chowkidars to prevent people from visiting the tombs. However, the structure remained until the end of the reign of the Umayyads, who were more interested in identifying and annihilating the Shia. The structure drew the Shia like a magnet and thus helped the Umayyads in easily apprehending them (the Shia). Perhaps this was the reason why the structure remained intact, even as the Umayyads desecrated Medina and Mecca and the shrines in those cities.

According to the authors of *Nuzhat Ahlil Haramain* and *A'yaanush Shia*, the first structure remained until the year 193 AH. ¹ The Abbasids, who succeeded the Umayyads in the rule, were initially engaged in establishing their control over the newly acquired government. At first, the jealousy and enmity to Imam Ali and his progeny was only secretly nurtured. It was in the period of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur ad-Dawaniqi that the first demolition of the shrine took place. So cruel was al-Mansur that he not only killed the Umayyads but also massacred thousands from the progeny of Ali and Fatima and their followers. No sooner than the shrine was demolished, a new and better structure was put up by the public at great peril.

For the second time, Harun ar-Rashid demolished the structure out of his intense enmity towards Imam Husayn (a.s.). He even ordered the tree that stood as a marker near the tomb to be cut. Harun ar-Rashid died shortly thereafter and immediately another structure was constructed in the year 193 AH. Some authors are of the opinion that al-Ma'mun got the second structure constructed in 193 AH only to pacify the enraged public by pretending to be a well-wisher of the *Ahlul Bayt*.

Sheik at-Toosi also narrates that when Yahya bin al-Mughira was with Jareer bin Abdul Hamid, an Iraqi came and on being questioned he said, "*Harun ar-Rashid destroyed the tomb of al-Husayn and cut the lote-tree which was near the tomb and that was used as a mark leading to the tomb. I have heard a tradition of the Prophet (S) who repeated thrice: 'May Allah's curse be upon the one who cuts the lote-tree.'* It is only now that I can understand the significance of the Prophet's saying."²

Sheikh at-Toosi in his *Amali* writes that in the year 247 AH, Ubaidullah bin Rabee'ah went to perform the Hajj and on his return, he went to visit the tombs of the martyrs of Karbala. He found that on the orders of the caliph, the graves were demolished and when the earth was sought to be ploughed, the bulls refused to tread the tomb (of Imam Husayn) and veered off to the right or the left of the tomb in spite of being beaten severely. Ubaidullah saying, "*By Allah, if the Umayyads have killed the grandson of the messenger of Allah, then their cousins the Abbasids too have oppressed him. By your life, his tomb has been desecrated even as they (the Abbasids) regret for not having supported in killing al-Husayn, they persecuted him after he was martyred.*"³ A similar report is narrated through Umar ibn Faraj ar-Rakhji.⁴

The third construction, which was a huge structure, remained for about forty years until al-Mutawakkil ascended the throne in 232 AH. Al-Mutawakkil not only demolished the structure but he also confiscated all the properties dedicated to the shrine saying that the graves of the dead did not need anything.⁵ Soon after the demolition, every time a new and larger structure was constructed by the public. In his tenure of fifteen years, al-Mutawakkil demolished the shrine not less than four times; in the years 233, 236, 237, and 247 AH.⁶

Al-Muntasir killed his father al-Mutawakkil and reconstructed the shrine. In 247 AH, the shrine was once again constructed. Al-Muntasir not only got the shrine reconstructed on a larger scale, but also he encouraged people to visit it.⁷

In the year 263 AH due to a conspiracy of the government, the roof of the shrine caved in and hundreds of visitors were crushed to death.

For ten years, the shrine remained without a roof. In 273 AH, Muhammad bin Zaid bin al-Hasan bin Muhammad bin Ismael, who was known as *Da'iy as-Saghir*, reconstructed the shrines at Karbala and Najaf once again.⁸

The shrine in Karbala was provided a dome and the shrine in Najaf was renovated and expanded. The shrines at Mecca and Medina were expanded and fresh constructions were added by Adhdud Dowla Khosrow bin Buwayh Dailamy. Ibnul Athir in his *at-Tarikh al-Kamil* praises the work done by Adhdud

Dowla. Ibnul Athir also records that a dacoit called Zaba bin al-Asadi looted the shrine several times. Adhdud Dowla sent a large contingent to apprehend the dacoits, but they escaped arrest.⁹ During this period, Imran bin Shahin constructed a mosque and walls surrounding a huge courtyard at Karbala that were known as the *Courtyard of Imran*. It is also said that under a vow taken by him, he also constructed a mosque at Kazimain. In the month of Rabi'ul Awwal in 407 AH, there was an accidental fire that destroyed the entire structure.¹⁰ Some say that the fire was accidental but a majority is of the opinion that it was started on the secret orders of the caliph al-Qadir Billah who was responsible for several cases of arson and looting.

After the fire, Ibn Sahlan Ramhurmuzi, who was appointed the prime minister, constructed a stone wall all around the shrines in Karbala and Najaf. These walls remained intact for about a century from 424 to 562 AH. Ibnul Athir was contemporary and has reported the incident in detail in his book about the reconstruction of the shrine by Abu Muhammad bin Sahlan.

In 526 AH, al-Mustarshid Billah merely appropriated all the moveable and immovable properties dedicated to the shrines, but he did not meddle with their structures.

In 620 AH, the caliph Nasiruddin's minister Mo'ayyiduddin Muhammad al-Alqami made many beautiful additions to the structure that remained intact for about 360 years.

An Arab, Muhammad bin Falah came to power in 754 AH. He was a student of Muhammad Sheikh Ahmed bin Fahad al-Hilli. He believed that Imam Ali (a.s.) was alive and that his soul has had transmigrated into him. He destroyed the dome of the shrine at Najaf saying that Imam Ali was God and that God would never die. He converted the shrine into the royal kitchen.¹¹

Muhammad bin Falah's son Ali went one step ahead of his father and claimed to be God incarnate. In 858 AH, he looted the pilgrims to Najaf and Karbala and destroyed the shrines and the houses surrounding them.

The foundations for the present structure of the shrine at Karbala were laid and a beautiful building was raised in 767 AH by Sultan Owais bin Sheikh Hasan al-Jalairi. His children Sultan Husayn and Sultan Ahmed continued the work of expansion and beautification. The Sultan's Bondsman Marjan was appointed governor of Baghdad. He revolted against the caliph, but when the caliph brought a huge army, Marjan's supporters deserted him. Marjan sought asylum in the shrine of Imam Husayn, dedicated all his wealth to the shrine, and vowed that if he was spared by the caliph, he would beautify the shrine. On receiving the Sultan's pardon, Marjan renovated the shrine and constructed a beautiful minaret. Ibn Kathir, the author of *al-Bidaya wan-Nihaya* who was a contemporary and eye witness, has reported the incident in detail at page 913 of vol. 14 of his book about the reconstruction of the shrine by Abu Muhammad bin Sahlan and the beautiful minaret raised by Marjan.¹²

On the tenth of Thul Hijjah, 1216 AH, corresponding to the year 1948 AD, the Wahabite army of Arabs entered Karbala and demolished, razed the shrine to the ground, and looted all decorations including the

gold inlays and precious stones. This incident is reported in detail in Stephen Hamly's book 'Four Centuries of Iraq's History'.

The minaret constructed by Marjan in 767 AH was demolished in the year 1354 AH. The excuse made was that the minaret was tilting towards one side and that it might, in its fall, damage the main shrine. It is commonly believed that the minaret was demolished only to misappropriate the huge endowments that were made by the Safawid kings.

Shah Abbas Safawi in 914 AH, Sultan Sulaiman Qanuni in 941 AH, Shah Tahmasb in 950 AH, the Qachar kings Sultan Agha Muhammad Khan, Fateh-Ali Shah, and Nasiruddin Shah and finally Mulla Tahir Saifuddin, towards the end of the 1300 AH, made several renovations and additions to the shrine that we see today.

The latest incident of demolition of the shrine of Imam Ali an-Naqi (al-Hadi) and Imam al-Hasan al-Askari (a.s.) took place at Samara in Northern Iraq by bomb blast on February 2, 2006. It bears testimony to the fact that even in these enlightened and civilized times, people get a sadistic pleasure in bombing and destroying the tombs. We can very well imagine the atrocities that would have been committed in the days when men were known to be more barbaric, illiterate and uncivilized.

- [1.](#) Tarikh Karbala-e-Mu'alla Published by Islah, Khajwa, Bihar, p. 109.
- [2.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 286.
- [3.](#) Ibid., p. 285-286.
- [4.](#) Ibid., p. 286.
- [5.](#) Tarikh Karbala-e-Mu'alla, p. 111 quoting Nasikhut Tawareekh, vol. 2 p. 37.
- [6.](#) Ibid., p. 152-153.
- [7.](#) Ibid., p. 115 quoting Nuzhat al-Haramain, vol. 2 p. 17 and A'yan ash-Shia, vol. 4 p. 53.
- [8.](#) Tarikh Karbala-e-Mu'alla, p. 117-118 quoting Nuzhat al-Haramain, p. 20 and A'yan ash-Shia, vol. 4 p. 306.
- [9.](#) Tarikh Karbala-e-Mu'alla, vol. 2, p. 173 quoting at-Tarikh al-Kamil, vol. 8 p.226,.
- [10.](#) At-Tarikh al-Kamil of ibnul Athir, vol. 9 p. 102.
- [11.](#) Tarikh Karbala-e-Mu'alla, vol. 2, p. 182-183 quoting Aatharush Shia, p. 58-59.
- [12.](#) Ibid., p. 139.

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