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Appropriating Jerusalem through Sacred Places: Disputed Land and Female Rituals at the Tombs of Mary and Rachel

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ABSTRACT

Due to deep-seated political tensions and intermittent violence between various streams of the city's three major religions, Jerusalem's sacred landscape is in the midst of significant change. One of the most salient expressions of this phenomenon is the renaissance of female saint shrines, most notably the Tomb of Mary and the proximate Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch. At these sites, female symbols, imagery rituals, and materiality have become powerful tools for asserting political claims that pertain to land and belonging. I will take stock of this phenomenon through the lens of different ethno-religious groups in Israel/Palestine that are availing themselves of female symbols (such as fertility, suffering, and maternal care) to advance various objectives. I find that these symbols have charged valences within minority communities. For members of the country's hegemonic denominations, Rachel is the Jewish people's "eternal mother" as well as a national symbol of the "return of the exiles" to their homeland. At the same time, local Catholic and Orthodox Christians view Mary to be "the mother of minorities" who suffered on behalf of and continues to provide succor for the weak. As a minority, Christians in Israel/Palestine employ this image of the Virgin as part

of their effort to struggle with their weakening grip over the territories. Viewing the Virgin as a protector of minority groups is a departure from the vast majority of the Christian world, where Mary constitutes a national symbol that reinforces social belonging. In sum, I show how, amid the ongoing religious struggle, both female icons and their respective sacred venues are mobilized by different groups for the sake of challenging the political order and reshaping the landscape. [Keywords: Sacred places, pilgrimage, anthropology of religion, Jerusalem, sacred tombs, sacred architecture, land claims]

As in other Mediterranean cities, ethno-religious struggles over space and resources are altering Jerusalem's sacred landscape. In recent years, there has been a spike in the veneration of female saint figures and pilgrimage to attendant shrines. These places—most of which center around caves, tombs, and/or wells—are informed by a wide range of female symbols, rituals, images, and objects, especially those that pertain to motherhood, fertility, barrenness, and female care. Over the course of this article, I will discuss a few major consequences of and reasons behind the revival of such Jewish and Christian venues. Among the female shrines that fall under this heading in the greater Jerusalem area are the Tomb of Mary, the Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch, the Milk Grotto,¹ the grave of Miriam the Laundress,² the Lady of the Wall,³ and Mary's Well. In addition, there are many others shrines sprinkled across Israel/Palestine, such as the house of Mariam Baouardy,⁴ the tomb of Rachel the wife of Rabbi Akiva,⁵ the cave of Hanna and her sons in Safad,⁶ and the sepulchers of Sarah, Leah, and Rebecca at the Cave of the Patriarchs.⁷ All these sites are in the midst of reconstruction and/or an upsurge in popularity. By disseminating female symbols in the public sphere, visitors to these shrines are physically transforming and politicizing the landscape. In my view, these manifestations of saint worship can be understood as a challenge to Israel/Palestine's volatile borders and political order.

For the sake of explicating these developments, I will compare Catholic and Orthodox Christian veneration at Mary's Tomb with the Jewish variety at the Tomb of Rachel. These two shrines were chosen as case studies not only on account of their close proximity, but also because they exemplify the current resurgence of female saint tombs throughout the region and due to their ritualistic and political intricacy.

Not unlike Mary's image in many parts of the world, Israeli Jews presently consider Rachel an "eternal mother"—a matriarch of the nation who is closely associated with the ingathering of the Jewish exiles. Moreover, she is a central popular symbol of noble yet unrelenting struggle against barrenness. By virtue of her heroic portrait in Jeremiah 31:15, Rachel overshadows the other Biblical matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah) in her credentials as the Jewish people's eternal mother. Mary, on the other hand, given the status of Christian communities throughout the Middle East, is viewed as a defender of oppressed minorities in Israel/Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt (Dionigi and Couroucli 2012, Jansen 2009:38-40, Keriakos 2012:197, Mittermeier 2010:9, Poujeau 2010).

The differences between Rachel and Mary notwithstanding, there are many similarities between the religious experiences at the two sites. Above all, the fertility rituals, female symbols, and feminine objects at both shrines convey staunch assertions regarding land and national identity (Besson 2002, Cole 2004:13-14, Koshar 2000:7, Mosse 1985:98, Saltman 2002, Winter 1995:123). Such demands are particularly relevant to Israel/Palestine, where borders are in constant flux and the subject of protracted dispute (Yiftachel 2006:51). Against this backdrop, I will contend with the following questions: Why are female symbols and imagery effective means for voicing politico-territorial claims? What are the implications of ethno-religious groups with divergent political aspirations and religious beliefs venerating female saints within the same general area? To this end, I will first focus on key concepts from the relevant literature such as virtuous mother, fertility, suffering, and care. My findings demonstrate that these notions assume particularly charged valences within Israel/Palestine's minority communities.

Female Symbols, Gendered Landscapes, and the Politics of Sacred Places

My analysis of the devotional experience, territoriality, and politics at the Tombs of Mary and Rachel is predicated on two major fields of research: the veneration of female saints and the political and contested nature of the sacred. With respect to the first, I will build on Gemzoe's (2009:150) insights for the sake of drawing a distinction between women as symbols and religious actors. The anthropological literature on female participation in various devotional frameworks indicates that women are challenging

authority, doctrine, and the composition of the landscape by providing feminine interpretations of religious symbols and the nation (Deeb 2006:216-218, 2009a:113-114, 2009b:249; Dubisch 1995:254; Gemzoe 2009:150; Hirschkind 2006:111; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002:4; Jansen 2009:41-42; Limbert 2010:42-43; Mahmood 2005:10-11; Quinn 2012; Sered 1986:35-36; Varzi 2006:125). In this article, I lean on works that explore gendered Middle Eastern religiosity and its political ramifications. For instance, Jansen's (2009:33-38) study on Marian veneration in Jordan shows that the nexus between identity, power, and image is crucial to understanding the kingdom's predominately Muslim society. More specifically, she discusses how two local renderings of the Virgin—a bronze statue and an oil painting of the Pietà scene—represent a shift in the local distribution of power between Christians and Muslims. A great deal of research has been conducted on the paradoxes of women's involvement in organized religion. Although most fundamentalist movements are characterized by oppressive patriarchal cultures, women nevertheless manage to exert influence via rituals and pilgrimage to sacred places. Saba Mahmood (2005:2-4) delves into the resurgence of female mosque attendance in Egypt since the 1980s. According to Mahmood, female activists have revised the ground rules for piety and modesty by offering new interpretations of canonical sources. In doing so, they have transformed the nature of everyday female religiosity in Cairo. On the basis of her fieldwork with a pious Shi'ite community in Beirut, Deeb (2006:8-11) avers that the quandary over how to be "modern" in Lebanon has transformed the religiosity, lifestyles (e.g., wardrobes), and politics of her female subjects. Exploring the symbolic dimension of their belief system, Deeb elaborates on how public piety has become these women's jihad. My own research on the Tombs of Rachel and Mary sheds further light on religiosity, symbolism, and imagery at female saint shrines. I show how pilgrims use rituals to press for changes to the landscape in the face of ongoing confrontations between agents of Judaization, Islamization, and Christianization of Israeli/Palestinian spaces.

With respect to the literature on the political and contested nature of the sacred, researchers have examined the impact of female icons and gendered symbolism on space, land, and nations. Cole (2004) demonstrates how female metaphors of reproduction, which were embedded into the ancient Greeks' ritual system and cultivated in their early poetry, linked the worldly realm to the divine. Moreover, she argues that this connection

spawned a powerful vocabulary for staking territorial claims (2004:22-25). For instance, the Greek goddesses Gaia, Demeter, Persephone, and Artemis all symbolize the relation between gender and geographical proprietorship. These ideas are not only germane to antiquity. Mosse (1985:90) takes stock of the assimilation of new ideas regarding womanhood by national movements in 19th-century Europe. In his view, iconic images like Germania, Britannia, and Marianne were paradigms of female respectability that helped foster a collective sense of national purpose. Yuval-Davis (1997:23) argues that the very creation of nationhood involved specific conceptions of “manhood” and “womanhood.” Additionally, she examines the role of gender relations in times of war and during large-scale national projects, such as campaigns to induce higher birth rates and forge a national culture. Within this framework, Yuval-Davis points to the friction between nationalism and feminism. Jager (2003:21) builds on this theme in her study of gender and nationalism in Korea. More specifically, she demonstrates how key narratives, like virtuous womanhood, have been enlisted, modified, and re-deployed to make sense of particular national events, revamp the people’s consciousness, and strengthen national identity (2003:53-73).

In her discussion of the revival of Marian shrines, Jansen (2009:8) suggests that pilgrims also “do” gender, nationality, and spirituality by generating meaning and realizing identities. Hermkens, Jansen, and Notermans (2009:1) observe that “modernity produces power inequality” between the sexes, ethnic groups, religions, and age groups. As a result, people have turned “to Mary in order to seek help and empowerment,” to the point where she has become a female icon—a veritable megastar in 21st-century Europe (2009:12-13). Comparing gendered symbolism in the Indian and Irish national movements during the first half of the 20th century, Thapar-Björket and Ryan (2002:302) show that the attendant discourses created symbolic roles for men and women that best served the emergent nation. In parallel, these same movements upended the British colonial imagery of the “feminized” nations, the most prevalent of which were desexualized representations of “Mother India” and “Mother Ireland.” With respect to women’s rights, Thapar-Björket and Ryan (2002:303) argue that the domestic sphere became a locus of resistance, confrontation, and politicization. Building on these scholarly contributions, I decipher the manner in which rituals and images at Mary’s and Rachel’s Tombs give expression to new political outlooks on the nation and challenge the masculine nature of Jerusalem’s landscape.

How, then, do sacred spaces influence the landscape? Chidester and Linenthal (1995:3) delve into the nexus between holy places and claims of legitimacy and ownership.⁸ In conflicts over land or sway, these venues tend to be battlegrounds or bulwarks of resistance against local authorities. For this reason, a shrine's character is often the outcome of a tug-of-war between its various claimants or between divergent religious needs. Eade and Sallnow (1991:5-10) note that these sites entail a farrago of imported, often contested, and extremely polarizing interests, perceptions, images, and discourses in all that concerns the object(s) of sanctification. Therefore, quite a few of these venues—particularly those with competing ownership claims over a tangible space—are scenes of power struggles between adversarial groups (Chidester and Linenthal 1995:8, Coleman and Eade 2004:4) that are locked in convoluted religious, national, ethnic, and/or territorial dispute (Bax 1990a:64, 1990b, 1991:30, 1995:78; Berger, Reiter, and Hammer 2010:1; Bowman 1993:431, 2010:195, 2011:371-372; Coleman 2004:56; Harris 1997; Herrero 1999:139; Skrbis 2005:446). Studies on novel or modified religious symbols and practices indicate that each side of a dispute attempts to carve out room for its own narrative (Gómes-Barris and Irazabal 2009:10, Kong 1992:8-19, Turner 1967:117, Tweed 1997:43-44).

Expanding on these theoretical insights on space and holiness, I argue that at Rachel's and Mary's Tombs, female symbols, objects, rituals, and myths are being spatialized by different ethno-religious groups for the purpose of voicing territorial demands and protecting against the current composition of the landscape. Among the tools at their disposal are feminine and maternal imagery, such as womb-mimicking architecture, and a multitude of like-minded objects (e.g., girdles,⁹ wedding gowns, shawls, and portraits). Most of these images and articles symbolize issues like fertility/barrenness and parturition. The renaissance of sacred female shrines is transpiring in masculine, belligerent settings where devotees hope to transform the social order by advancing feminine ideas as political agendas (see Deeb 2006:29-31, Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002:343, Mahmood 2005:3-4, Mittermeier 2010:6).

A Tale of Two Mothers: Context and Methodology

In Israel/Palestine, various ethno-religious groups lay claim to space and landscapes. More specifically, an array of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish

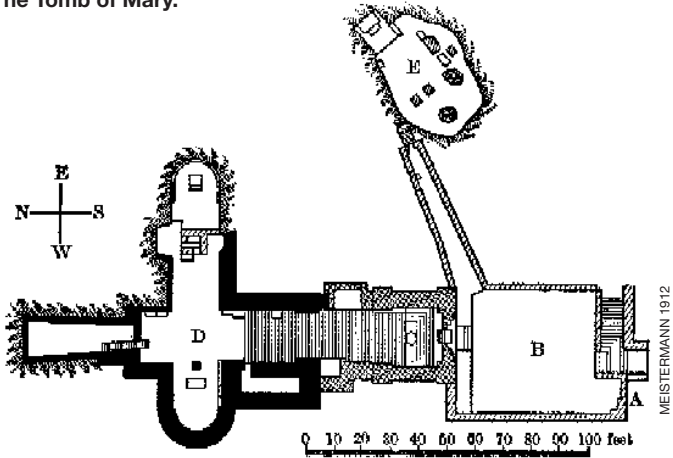
communities are struggling to hold onto or wrest control of properties, land reserves, and other resources (Rabinowitz 2001:66-67). Each of the groups asserts their demands at specific venues. With these goals in mind, claimants have adopted numerous economic, financial, legal, and political strategies, some of which entail highly aggressive and even violent tactics. Over the last few years, sacred places have become a major, legitimate platform for raising territorial issues (see Figures 1 and 2).

One of the more salient examples of female saint veneration on the contemporary Jewish landscape is Rachel's Tomb (Bowman 2013:81; Limor 2007:219; MacCalister 1912; Schiller 1978b; Selwyn 2009, 2011:290; Sered 1986:8-9; Strickert 2007:138)—a site that is embraced by all of the country's Jewish denominations. Like the figure of Mary in Christian traditions, Jewish canon and lore view Rachel to be a suffering mother. The cult surrounding her burial site is founded on long-standing traditions. In Biblical and Rabbinical sources, love, barrenness, motherhood, and demise are the main themes in the Rachel narrative (Sered 1991:132, 1998:6).

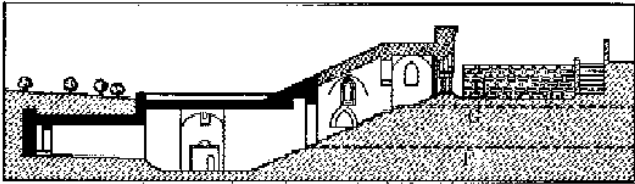
Over the centuries, the Tomb of Rachel has undergone multiple construction phases. The core structure—the dome and columns—dates back to the Crusader era, and the Muslim elements of its graveyard were completed by the Ottomans in 1622 (Schiller 1978b:23). Over 200 years later, Moses Montefiore (a British–Jewish philanthropist) purchased the site on behalf of the Jewish community. Not only did Montefiore repair the tomb, but he constructed a vaulted ante-chamber for Muslim prayers and burial preparations (the room was even furnished with a *mihrab*, a Muslim prayer niche). However, the most glaring change to the site was wrought in 1995 when the architect Yaron Katz was commissioned by the Israeli government to renovate the site in accordance with strenuous security demands. To this end, the architect surrounded the entire compound with a stone wall, which he embellished with dozens of sealed arches (see Figure 2). Currently, the most important celebration at this shrine is held on the customary anniversary of Rachel's death (the 11th of Heshvan, a Hebrew month that falls during autumn). On this day, thousands of Jews flock to the site for her *hillulah* (a feast marking the date of a saint's passing).

Mary's Tomb also has a long history of changes and turmoil, much of which is beyond the scope of the present article. This Crusader-era complex with Byzantine foundations (Pringle 2007:287, Schiller 1978a:103) was built inside a subterranean cavern. The site is run, in part, by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Local Orthodox Christians deem the

Figure 1: The Tomb of Mary.

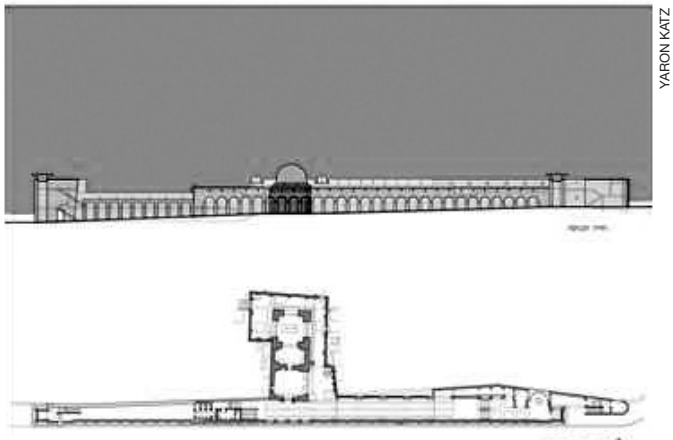


Plan of the Church of the Assumption and of the Grotto of Gethsemani.
 A. Stairs. B. Courtyard. C. The Porch. D. Subterranean Church.
 E. Grotto of Gethsemani.



Vertical Section of the Church of the Assumption.
 F. Primitive Level of the Courtyard. G. Level in the XII Century.
 H. Present Level.

Figure 2: The Tomb of Rachel.¹⁰



Patriarchate to be the mother church of all Christendom¹¹ and the faithful keeper of Byzantine tradition (Hann and Goltz 2010:13, Mahieu 2010:80, Poujeau 2010). For example, this institution continues to follow the Julian calendar, which runs 13 days behind the Gregorian one. According to local Orthodox priests I interviewed, the shrine's cruciform structure is meant to commemorate and embody the ancient narratives of the Virgin's final days on Earth, especially her Dormition and Assumption. Moreover, they repeatedly explained to me that Mary "fell asleep" and that the Apostles escorted her body to this gravesite, from where she then ascended to heaven. In Jerusalem, Marian sites, processions, and other rituals are naturally designed to reenact these solemn events.

The largest annual event at Mary's Tomb is the Orthodox Dormition Feast, which is held between August 25 and September 5 (Stadler 2011:2, Stadler and Luz 2014:185). This celebration is predicated on scriptural texts, some of which are over 1,600 years old (Boss 2012, Rubin 2009, Shoemaker 2002:3).¹² In addition, liturgical descriptions and archaeological finds confirm the existence of a vivid Marian cult in and around Jerusalem from as far back as the 5th century at the Church of Kathisma (Seat of the God-Bearer)¹³ and later on at the Church of Mary. Likewise, the Dormition Feast boasts a venerable liturgical order consisting of utterances and customs that are assiduously preserved by the Jerusalem Patriarchate—the organizer of the denomination's official events. As explained to me by various Greek Orthodox representatives, the observance of these customs is part and parcel of their efforts to adhere to the church's scriptural tradition and perpetuate what they deem to be the most authentic Marian shrine in Jerusalem. That said, many of the lay participants come with their own expectations, fantasies, and rituals concerning the veneration of the Holy Mother in this city, much of which contravenes the host's sanctioned script (Stadler 2011:3). It also bears noting that, unlike the events at the Tomb of Rachel, those at the Marian site are not covered by Israel's mainstream press or included on the state calendars. As a result, these traditions are unaffiliated with the state and largely excluded from the public domain. The two venues are approximately 5.5 miles apart, but a search for the best route between them on Google Maps indicates that the drive is likely to take over an hour. This estimate, as we shall see, epitomizes the story behind these venerated places.

Since 2003, I have attended a wide range of activities at both shrines. At Mary's Tomb, I witnessed Orthodox and Catholic masses, blessings,

processions, rosaries, and other rituals throughout the entire year. I photographed and filmed many of these activities. Moreover, I participated in informal discussions and conducted open-ended and in-depth interviews with visitors and organizers in Hebrew, Arabic, English, French, and Russian (with the help of students and colleagues). This study also involved extensive archival and library research. Many of the examples cited herein were taken from observations that I made during the above-mentioned Dormition Feast. Over the course of this ten-day celebration, thousands of pilgrims from both Israel/Palestine and Orthodox countries the world over flock to Jerusalem in order to mark the twilight of the Virgin's mortal existence. I introduced myself to visitors as a university lecturer who is conducting research on Christian and Jewish sites. Most of the lay devotees were glad to speak with me, answer questions, share their views and feelings, and discuss their personal lives. In contrast, the ecclesiastical hosts were much more reluctant to engage in conversation on any topic whatsoever.

With respect to my fieldwork at Rachel's Tomb, I participated in rituals and heard sermons throughout the year. These steps were augmented by photographs and short videos as well as informal discussions with pilgrims. Most of my interlocutors were Israeli members of Jewish Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox streams (Stadler 2012).¹⁴ Due to the rigid gender separation at the compound, the lion's share of my findings is based on visits to the women's section. As with my research on Mary's Tomb, I pored over archaeological, geographical, and historical documents pertaining to the site.¹⁵ In general, my presence at the Tomb of Rachel went unnoticed, and most of the devotees that I approached were happy to be interviewed.

I have classified my findings at the two shrines under three principal headings: 1) fertility, maternal care, and prenatal rituals or symbols; 2) motherhood in the service of territorial claims; and 3) patriotic versus minority mothers.

Fertility Rituals, Maternal Care, and Prenatal Symbols

Rachel's and Mary's Tombs (representations of death) are associated with feminine symbols and objects, fertility rituals, and the quest for childbirth and regeneration.¹⁶ Motherhood is a particularly sensitive issue in Israel/Palestine's ethno-religious communities, as the importance of maternal care and healing is compounded under the shadow of political anxiety



Figure 3: Pilgrims kissing the Icon of the Theotokos, The Tomb of Mary, Jerusalem, 2009.

and strife. Both Jews and Christians alike perceive themselves as living in a state of siege. Given the robust local pro-natal ideologies, a ritualistic-cum-symbolic emphasis is naturally placed on reproduction and fertility (see Csordas 1997:34). The two shrines indeed exemplify this worldview.

According to Jansen's (2009:38) above-mentioned study on the cult of Mary in Jordan, local Catholics emphasize their religious identity in predominantly Muslim surroundings while also seeking to distinguish themselves from other Christian streams. Varzi (2006:111) has observed that in post-revolutionary Iran, rural migrants adapt themselves to the city's more conservative Islamic norms. For instance, men grow beards and women clad themselves in black. In her studies of Korean nationalism and gender, Jager (1996:10-13, 1998:121-123, 2003:41-44) demonstrates that the allegorical link between romantic reunions and national reunification was grounded on a consensus surrounding the *proper attitude* towards husbands who did not return from the front. This outlook, which was epitomized by female archetypes like the "chaste widow" and "loyal wife," was essential to the growth and prosperity of the the Korean family unit (1996:14). Insights from these works can be projected onto veneration practices at the Tombs of Mary and Rachel. Despite the nearly identical



Figure 4: The Icon of the Theotokos, The Tomb of Mary, Jerusalem, 2009.

rituals, themes, and expressions at the two shrines, each is used by its respective Jewish and Christian visitors to resist different authorities and express divergent national claims.

At Mary's Tomb, quite a few of the events and rituals integrate female symbols (see Coleman 2004, 2009:24, 26). Stepping out of the Jerusalem sunshine, visitors to this dimly-lit and often humid shrine feel as though they are entering a womb. Many pilgrims indeed describe the moment of their arrival inside the cavern with references to the "Theotokos's body" and her resurrection.¹⁷ Adjacent to the site's portal is a monumental, Crusader-era staircase consisting of 48 steps. During Orthodox festivals, nuns empty boxes of candles near the vestibule while barefoot, and lay women arrange the contents along the stairway. The flickering wicks light the way for devotees, who eagerly descend the steps to what a large percentage of my interviewees described as the most revered part of the compound: the sepulcher of the Holy Mother. Apropos to the identity of its saint, this tomb abounds with maternal symbols and a sense of kinship. On one of my field trips, I met Nada, a 20-year-old Christian Orthodox Palestinian from Beit Jala.¹⁸ As we reached the bottom of the stairs, she told me about her protracted difficulties conceiving and the hardships that this has posed for her personal and communal relationships. Nada then

dwelled on how her weekly visits to the shrine buoy her spirits: “Mary has already drawn on her experience as a mother to help others in need.” Ana, an Orthodox sexagenarian from Jerusalem, comes to the site after every celebration in order to help clean the premises. She started these votive duties after being diagnosed with cancer. Along with Ana, a group of women devoutly scrub the wide stone steps. While immersed in this labor, the volunteers spoke at length about how the Theotokos “gives life to the needy” who worship at her tomb on a daily basis.

The sepulcher itself is housed in a small aedicule on the main floor. On feast days, there is invariably a long and cramped line of women and men by the entrance to this structure. The iconostasis¹⁹ features various Byzantine icons and religious paintings of the Last Supper, the Dormition, Mary’s Assumption, and the like. Small rugs denote where visitors should kneel down and pray (cf. Herzfeld 1990:109). An undersized door along the iconostasis leads to the sepulcher. To get in, visitors must bend down, contract their necks, backs, and heads, and squeeze their way in. Stationed nearby are clergy and lay employees of the Patriarchate who make sure that everyone enters head first and facing the tomb. Once inside the exceedingly low and narrow chamber, each pilgrim is given but a few moments to bow, pray, kiss the glass-encased tomb, icons, and relics, and make a vow before being pushed out. As they leave through the exit on the opposite side, participants are instructed to turn their heads towards the sarcophagus. Much like a fetus leaving the womb, they once again scrunch up their bodies and wobble backwards, while keeping their eyes on the tomb until making it past the diminutive door. Mariam, a 50-year-old Orthodox elementary-school teacher from Ramallah, told me that “I really like to repeat this ritual again and again, to feel Mary inside my body, [to appreciate the Virgin’s] life, which ended in her Assumption and reunion with her son.” Whenever I observed these lines, believers remarked that the precious moments opposite the tomb itself are the high point of their pilgrimage. In fact, some were moved to tears and others were left shuddering. It is worth reiterating that the ritualistic ingress and egress from the aedicule can be interpreted as a reenactment of parturition and/or a symbol of rebirth. This experience is only intensified by the shrine’s funerary and afterlife ambience.

The majority of pilgrims that I met at Rachel’s Tomb came to pray for the birth of a child. After passing through the Israeli army’s checkpoints, visitors proceed to either the men’s or women’s section. This sort of

arrangement is rather commonplace as the important Jewish taboo of gender separation is maintained around the clock at dozens of institutionalized sites throughout the country, such as the Western Wall and the Baba Sali's grave²⁰ (Bilu and Ben Ari 1997). Both of the sections abut a part of the matriarch's tomb, so that all the visitors—male and female—can touch it. At any given hour, there are usually women reciting psalms in unison or alone. Showcasing their piety, many of the pilgrims hold several copies of the Book of Psalms open at once, stacking them on top of one another. The space closest to the sarcophagus is usually packed with devotees. Shutting their eyes, women immerse themselves in prayer. From time to time, they grope and kiss the tomb. When I asked about the content of their prayers, most said that they recited Biblical passages connected to Rachel, particularly those verses depicting the anguish caused by her barrenness. Lastly, each of my interlocutors added a fertility wish for either themselves or their children.

The site's most popular and visible practice is to wrap a red string around the tomb seven times, whereupon the thread is removed and worn as a fertility charm. According to Sered (1989:38), this custom took off during the 1970s and early 1980s. Nowadays, Jewish women of all stripes who are unable to conceive or have experienced a miscarriage are encouraged to visit the shrine and partake in this ritual. On one of my field trips, I asked Shifra, a young Orthodox Jewish woman from Haifa, about this custom. She answered that the scarlet thread is worn for good luck as well as "spiritual and physical blessings." Additionally, Shifra explained that "It was Rachel who felt the trauma of birth pangs [while in labor with Benjamin] until her last breath; this is why she is the perfect mediator for a pregnant woman." Chana, a Haredi woman in her early 20s, added that "the red string protects me against the evil eye of jealousy, which is basically capable of destroying my chances of being a mother."

If the thread fails to deliver, women can borrow a key to the building and place it under their pillow for the night. Meira, an ultra-Orthodox woman from Safad, said that this *segula* (talisman) helps ensure smooth childbirth. While the key ritual goes back generations, new customs and objects are constantly being introduced to the site (Teman 2008:14). For instance, tens of pilgrims told me the story behind the curtain of the shrine's *aron ha-kodesh* (holy ark or Torah scroll cabinet). According to Shula, an elderly woman from Gilo (a Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem close to Bethlehem), "the aron's covering is made from the wedding gown of Nava

Appelbaum—the young woman who was murdered by a Palestinian terrorist in a coffee shop in Jerusalem the night before her wedding. Praying at this place works miracles for women.”

As evidenced from these interviews, many of the rituals at both sites consist of symbols of fertility, motherhood, and rebirth. Pilgrims stress the universal qualities of Mary or Rachel, including their ordinary experiences as mothers (see Gemzoe 2009:156). The traditions and histories of the two shrines certainly differ, but the religious themes bear a close resemblance. Above all, the fertility customs and symbols of regeneration at both venues center around sacred tombs—quintessential manifestations of death. Be that as it may, devotees at each site take these same practices and symbols in opposite political directions.

Claiming Disputed Lands via the Sacred

At both tombs, rituals and symbols of fertility, motherhood, and rebirth are embraced by pilgrims as a means for reaffirming their commitment and bonds to the land of Israel/Palestine. What is more, pilgrims mobilize these elements in support of or opposition to local political ideologies and policies, especially with respect to territorial rights. This leads us to ask: Why do female symbols and imagery constitute powerful tools for advancing these sort of claims? According to Cole (2004), bequeathing land to inheritors was ritually mirrored by its consecration to gods. This distinction between the temporal and holy spheres was associated with the ritualistic representation of gender. For instance, the female body was described as a miniature landscape whose moisture warrants regulation (Cole 2004:3-5). Eade and Sallnow (1991:5-10) and Chidester and Linenthal (1995:3) also accentuate the connection between sacred places and claims of legitimacy and ownership.²¹ Likewise, female rituals, objects, and symbols at Mary's and Rachel's Tombs serve as political tools in disputes over land, which are exacerbated by disputed national borders and controversial landscapes.

As previously mentioned, Marian events in Jerusalem draw pilgrims from all over the Christian world. What is more, local Christians come from the Galilee (Nazareth and a host of villages), Jerusalem and the vicinity (e.g., Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahur, and Ramallah), and other areas such as Lod (Lydda), Ramle, Gaza, and Jericho. These visitors avail themselves of female symbols in Mary's Tomb and numerous other Israeli/

Palestinian sites, with the objective of calling attention to their plight as ethno-religious minorities in areas and landscapes dominated by Jews and Muslims (see Cragg 1991). In this context, the Virgin symbolizes the Arab-Christian community's struggle for recognition of its identity and territorial claims vis-à-vis other religious groups. The main sources of this minority's angst are the State of Israel, particularly its efforts to Judaize the landscape, and the corresponding trends of Islamization. On the other hand, the anxiety of Jewish pilgrims at Rachel's Tomb stems from the demographic preponderance of Muslims throughout the greater Middle East, along with the perceived threats and well-documented unrest across Israel's borders. In this respect, female symbols, shrines, and imagery related to Rachel and Mary are tied to identity politics, land, and the nation.

Koshar (2000:32-33) explores how monuments bolster national traditions. In Germany, for example, the placement of monuments in forest clearings or atop mountains renders them compelling national symbols. Likewise, the recounting of Mary's and Rachel's life stories, the established ritualistic terminology in their respective Jerusalem-area shrines, and the emphasis on female elements all promote shared memories that generate different feelings of continuity/rupture and national allegiance (Koshar 2000:13). Female practices and symbols at Rachel's Tomb reinforce the narrative of Jewish belonging in this region and Israel's pro-natal ideology, which aspires to replace the Jews who perished in the Holocaust for the sake of building the land and defending its borders (El-Or and Aran 1995:61, Goidin 2007, Huyssen 2003, Sered 1986:12). Alternatively, quite a few of the symbols at Mary's Tomb are evoked to shore up the Orthodox and Catholic minorities' position in their struggles over land, identity, belonging, and demographic sustainability vis-à-vis Jews, Muslims, and other Christians. Given the declining numbers of Christians in the Middle East (see Ben-Ze'ev and Abouraiya 2004), these are indeed uphill battles. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics,²² the number of Christians in "Israel proper" is approximately 151,700, or some two percent of the total population. Moreover, the 2009 *CIA World Factbook*²³ estimates that there are 167,000 and 10,000 Christians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, respectively. Against this backdrop, symbols and practices at the shrines under review are protagonists in ongoing Muslim, Jewish, and Christian historical sagas throughout the region.

The rituals at the Tomb of Rachel are performed within the stressful, politicized, and militarized context of the hegemon's unilateral attempts



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Figure 5: The Tomb of Rachel, 2014.

to demarcate a contested national border. As alluded to earlier, getting to the shrine involves entering a walled enclave that hugs the outskirts of Bethlehem. The site was once 460 meters south of Jerusalem's municipal border. However, on September 11, 2002, the State of Israel decided to include the compound on its side of the planned separation barrier.²⁴ Today, the shrine is indeed enclosed within a compound that is right behind the separation wall. What is more, it has been formally annexed to the city of Jerusalem (Selwyn 2009:44). These unilateral measures have elicited several reactions from Muslim Palestinians. To begin with, they emphasize that the shrine is located in a Muslim cemetery and is an Islamic place of worship. Since 1996, Palestinians have increasingly referred to it as Bilal ibn Rabah Mosque, in honor of the Prophet Muhammad's personal companion and former slave. Ibn Rabah is also considered the first *muezzin* (crier for prayers) (Arafat 2013).

As part of their efforts to refute the Muslim narrative and solidify their own claims to the land, Israeli Jews accentuate Rachel's Biblical legacy, her age-old role as the "eternal mother" of the Jewish people, and the exclusive rights to the shrine that the Ottomans granted to their community.²⁵

In the absence of permanent borders between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the Jewish state has forced its own boundaries and narrative on its rivals by placing facts on the ground at the site and expropriating the area around it. From a devotional standpoint, Jewish pilgrims acquire the shrine by reciting Biblical passages, disseminating their myths and narratives, observing customs, and holding events. Rituals, then, are not only performed in the hopes of securing divine intervention for personal needs or advancing pro-natal ideologies, but also to evince a handful of political imaginations that symbolize the Jews' dramatic return to what they call the "Promised Land." These steps have indeed placed the Jewish version of the shrine in ascendancy. In conversations held at Rachel's Tomb, this sense of propriety came across loud and clear. A case in point is the following excerpt from my interview with Smadar, a middle-aged Orthodox woman from Jerusalem:

Rachel's life was tragic, yet we know that throughout her ordeal she remained absolutely faithful to God. All the sages declared that Jacob buried Rachel on the roadside so she could pray for them [i.e., Jacob's 12 sons] as they were being led into exile...Jeremiah reminded us all that "Rachel weeps for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children who are gone..." God's answer was clear: "Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears, for there is reward for your labor." This is how we know that this place belongs to us today and that the Jews will "return from the lands of their enemies to their own country" [Jeremiah 31:14-15]. These are God's words to our mother.

Smadar employs all the principal "Rachelite" symbols with the intention of conveying the message that the Land of Israel belongs to the Jews. In the process, she emphasizes the ingathering of the exiles. The history of and legends about the matriarch are thus interwoven into the concepts of the nation.

Maternal symbols and fertility rituals are also used to advance political and territorial objectives at Mary's Tomb. The rights to this shrine have long been a messy affair. Pursuant to the "Status Quo (Holy Land Sites)"—a decree issued by the British administration of Mandatory Palestine (Cust 1929:3) that is still in force—Mary's Tomb is jointly run by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate²⁶ and the Armenian Church. Based on an



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Figure 6: The Tomb of Rachel, view from the Muslim Cemetery, 2013.

18th-century Ottoman *firman* promulgated by Sultan Osman II, this document preserved the existing division of ownership, worshiping and administrative rights, and quotidian duties at numerous Muslim, Christian, and/or Jewish sites. However, the myriad groups that were affected by this edict never agreed on its terms, so that to this day each claimant nurses open grievances. In essence, the decree merely affirmed and perpetuated a set of non-binding *modi vivendi* that were reached to allow for continued pilgrimage to the various places under dispute.

As per the status quo at Mary's Tomb, the Greek Orthodox and Armenians are responsible for cleaning the venue on a rotational basis and holding the keys to its rooms. The British document also stipulates that the aforementioned iconostasis should partition the main floor into distinct areas, each of which is under the control of either the Armenians or the Greek Orthodox (Cust 1929:12, 35). Accordingly, most of the official Orthodox services are held to the right of the bottom step, east of the iconostasis. Other denominations also have access to the site. For instance, the Syriac Orthodox Church is entitled to hold services in certain parts of the grotto. Until the early 1700s, the Catholic Church had exclusive rights to the

entire compound; it even possesses ample documentary evidence of this state of affairs. By the early 18th century, though, the Greek Orthodox and Armenians each controlled an altar. The Latins were completely expelled from the shrine in 1757 (Cust 1929:35), and they now have limited rights at the site. As it now stands, the tension between different Christian streams at Mary's Tomb is part of a broader struggle between a variety of state players with interests in Jerusalem, foremost among them Greece, Jordan, and Israel (see Pringle 2007:171, 193). In any event, the vast majority of lay attendees are unfamiliar with this facet of the shrine's history or even its internal division between Christian streams. These long-standing disputes are reflected in the modern-day worship at this ancient grotto.

For the sake of voicing their individual and collective narratives of hardship, marginalized local Greek Orthodox and Catholics turn to personal fertility rituals and symbols of motherhood. Part of this process involves envisioning a different, more feminine reality and asserting territorial claims through female symbols and icons that are connected to the Virgin. Moreover, devotees recite passages from the canon and other historical sources that pertain to Mary's final days in Jerusalem, thereby projecting her trials and tribulations on their own lives. Put differently, these oppressed minorities are longing for a new socio-political order. It also bears noting that the Virgin is considered "the mother of minorities" in other parts of the world, especially countries where different ethno-religious groups are vying for the same land.²⁷ Her moniker is further used in various Christian diasporas (Coleman 2009:27-29, Napolitano 2009:97).²⁸

Pilgrims draw a correlation between their experiences at Mary's Tomb and their sense of belonging in Israel/Palestine. During the 2009 Dormition Feast, I asked Maria, a newlywed Orthodox Christian, about her feelings toward this site. She explained that its rituals constitute the most efficacious means for "rebuilding" her perilously fragmented, lost, and besieged Orthodox identity/body. While making our way out of the grotto, her husband George noted that because Jerusalem is "the birthplace of our nation and the most important place on Earth for Christians," it is incumbent upon "us to affirm our belonging" to and collective memories of "this holy city." The precarious state of local Christians, he said,

...is a problem of power and ownership. In our faith, we prefer to show our respect for the land through the veneration of Mary, our Mother, rather than taking the land with blood and wars.

This point was particularly cogent against the backdrop of the large contingent of Israeli security personnel that demonstratively took up positions at the site. Such a presence is felt throughout Jerusalem and its environs whenever there is a sizable event.

Local Christians that I interviewed often shared their territorial concerns and frustrations by declaring that their sense of belonging to the land centers around the figure of Mary—her local history, such as the Dormition and Assumption, along with cherished Marian icons in the area—rather than any national affiliation. With so many powerful religious groups (e.g., Haredis and Catholic orders) and a handful of countries staking a claim to Jerusalem, Christian minorities feel that they have been left on the outside looking in. This sort of predicament indeed characterizes places to which manifold groups have historical ties. The rituals at Mary's Tomb betray the assertions of a socially marginalized community that feels stateless and harbors fears that it will ultimately lose the protracted struggle over the Holy Land. As Luis, a middle-aged resident of Jaffa, put it: "As Arab Christian minorities, we have a strong obligation to visit the grotto of our Mother again and again, even in difficult times, because if we don't venerate these places, we will eventually lose our historical claims to the land, particularly Jerusalem." In other words, Luis visits the shrine for two reasons: it is an ancient Christian site and, as a Christian, he has minority status in the Jewish state.

At the two sites under review, pilgrims avail themselves of feminine rituals and symbols of motherhood that reflect the political economy of fertility. More generally, communities that are embroiled in a struggle for survival turn to these kinds of practices and symbols for the purpose of reinforcing their historical memory and staking claim to territorial rights. Under the circumstances in Israel/Palestine, the Tombs of Mary and Rachel present a unique opportunity for both hegemonic Jews and minority Christians to challenge the social order.

Two Iconic Mothers

The juxtaposition of worship and territorial claims at these two venues speaks to the impact of female iconography and rituals on the public sphere. Huyssen (2003) considers urban expanses, monuments, architecture, and sculptures to be spatial palimpsests. Following in his footsteps, the sites under review can be interpreted as potent, canonical, feminine markers of

spaces that bear traces of the past—memories of these contested shrines at earlier points in their history. Put differently, they are heterotopias or hegemonic outposts that mold collective imaginaries (Huysen 2003:7). Cole (2004:7-9) argues that the imagined landscape of the ancient Greeks abounded in female imagery. For instance, Demeter (the goddess of agriculture) and her daughter Persephone (queen of the underworld) “were complementary figures who united the natural landscape...and the realm of the dead” (2004:132). In light of this, how are the Tombs of Mary and Rachel affecting the Israeli/Palestinian landscape, both physically and in all that concerns the inhabitants’ perception of the expanse? And why are these two saints being re-embraced by different ethno-religious groups in the region at this particular juncture? As we have seen, both iconic figures play analogous roles in the procreation ideologies and territorial claims of two competing national groups, each of which perceives itself as being under attack. For this reason, local Jews and Christians are recruiting places, images, and memories as part of their efforts to change the landscape and improve the lot of their respective communities.

Owing to its female symbols and customs as well as its pilgrims’ imaginations, the rituals at Rachel’s Tomb fall under the category of a “patriotic mother” cult. This popular form of worship conflates saint veneration with nationalist sentiments of a dominant group, thereby strengthening the notion that the state is the people’s “motherland” (Mosse 1985). In addition, these sort of cults embed correlations between land, fertility, and female imagery in the public consciousness (Cole 2004:13-14; Mayer 2000:7, 16; Yuval-Davis 1997:26). As a symbol of national vigor and unity, the Israeli version of Rachel may be compared to “national Virgins” in, say, Mexico City (Wolf 1958:34), Tinos, Greece (Dubisch 1995:249; Haland 2012:94, 99-100), and Poland (Galbraith 2000:61-62, Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2007:40). While Rachel is commemorated through Biblical memories and religious events, this veneration is fused with current politics and modern conceptions of the Land of Israel and the Jewish nation.

According to Sered, Rachel began to be called the “mother of the nation” (*em ha’uma*) even before Israel’s establishment. In the aftermath of World War II, Jews associated the matriarch with the Holocaust, their flight from Europe, and return to the Promised Land. In the decades following the country’s declaration of independence, the stress was mostly on the ingathering of the exiles. However, this mythical figure assumed a more assertive disposition when talks over the state’s “final borders” were thrust into the

limelight during the early 1990s. Since then, the Tomb of Rachel has been ensnared in political turmoil. More specifically, it has played a lead role in the government's concerted effort to Judaize-cum-Israelize the landscape and extend Jewish authority. At the same time, the site has become a major Israeli tourist destination; dozens of the government's ubiquitous "Heritage Site" signposts point in the Tomb's direction on the highways leading to and



Figure 7: Stamp of Rachel the Matriarch.

from Jerusalem (Selwyn 2009:43). Likewise, the anniversary of the saint's death has not only been incorporated into the Israeli religious school system's curriculum, but is officially marked on the same date as Yitzchak Rabin Memorial Day (Vinitzky-Seroussi 2010:137-138). In other words, the matriarch who sacrificed herself for sake of the nation during the Biblical epoch is viewed as a protector of the modern state as well (Mosse 1985:94). It comes as no surprise, then, that an Israeli postage stamp was recently issued featuring Rachel's Tomb and the saint "weeping for her children" (see Figure 7).²⁹

On one of my visits to the shrine, a middle-aged observant Jew named Shulamit enthusiastically explained why she prays at this site on a regular basis: "It is written in the sacred scriptures that Rachel *imainu* [our mother] works on our

behalf more than all of our holy forefathers combined. While the others are all hiding in the cave [i.e., the Tomb of the Patriarchs], she constantly reveals herself to us here." Avigail, a 25-year-old Orthodox woman from Jerusalem, added that "the inspiration of the divine spirit [*shkchinah*] is here in our mother's tomb, and we should all pray for our well-being here in her eternal lands." Chiming into the conversation, an adult yeshiva student, Joseph, offered the following account of the shrine:

When we celebrate her death, we celebrate the day when our father Jacob stood here and prophesized thousands of years into the future. He knew that the Jews are going to go through years upon years of exile, that they would have no Temple, no prophet, or altar to revere. But he knew that they would return, and upon their return, they would need a mother. So he decided to bury her [Rachel] on the side of the road. He buried her for us; he buried our mother Rachel, who is waiting for us between Ephrata and Bethlehem.

At this point, I asked Joseph why he comes to the Tomb. “Our mother,” he replied, “opened her arms to us, she wept, she gathers all her children, and brings them hope.”

In unfolding their narratives, each of the three pilgrims accentuated the site’s sanctity and political import by commingling Biblical phrases with current events. In other words, they cited from the canon with the objective of depicting and perpetuating Rachel’s role as the iconic mother of the Jewish nation.

Conversely, the figure of the Virgin can be understood, in Winter’s turn of phrase (1995:52), as a “collective solace” from bereavement, or a way to commemorate the dead that strengthens the bonds between a people slowly losing its land. In Mary’s Tomb, representations of the suffering mother indeed give voice to the hardships of Israel/Palestine’s Christian Orthodox and Catholics—vulnerable groups that are excluded from bases of power and the public sphere. For George, the above-cited newlywed, pilgrimage to this shrine “helps us Christians, as minorities, feel that we are returning to the cultural center. We do this by returning to the true times of the Apostles and...Mary’s Assumption.” Leaning on “minority mother” symbols, George imagines a prominent role for his denomination. Other local Christians that I spoke to claimed that their minority status has fragmented their identities and selves. From their standpoint, visiting this site is no less than an opportunity to reassemble these shattered pieces by enlisting scriptural and mythical symbols of the Virgin’s maternal qualities and her experiences in Jerusalem to strengthen their ties to the land and imagine a new dispensation.

After recuperating from a long bout with illness, a 60-year-old Orthodox Christian resident of Jerusalem named Helena told me that she had vowed to make an annual pilgrimage to the Tomb of Mary for the following reasons:

She [Mary] is a mother; I am not a mother. I do not even know how to be a mother. I go to visit my Mother when I am sick, you know, when I suffer from pain, just like my own mother used to do. Where should I go? I will go to my Mother or to my Father [i.e., Jesus]. I will defiantly go to my Mother for help...I will visit her in her cave.

To justify her frequent visits, Helena referred to the devoted care that the Holy Mother is believed to provide the faithful. By attributing their convalescence to the Virgin, pilgrims forge a new public role for the saint.

Owing to the steady exodus of native Christians from Israel/Palestine, Mary's Tomb can also be viewed as what Couroucli (2012) has termed "a post-Ottoman space." More specifically, it is a region where groups intent on carving out homogeneous national territories are forcing "ethno-religious minorities" to abandon communities in which their families have dwelt for generations on end (Couroucli 2012:1-2, Jansen 2009:40). It is against this backdrop that Christians in Israel/Palestine view Mary as a sort of imaginary album stocked with photos from bygone eras. These same pictures are used to strengthen their minority identities and challenge the political, religious, and ethnic status quo. In sum, the images of Mary and Rachel in the greater Jerusalem area are exceedingly nuanced and often contested semiotic resources (Coleman 2009:20) that are mobilized in an effort to lay claim to the land.

Conclusion

By virtue of this ethnographic comparison between the Tomb of Rachel and the Tomb of Mary, it is evident that pilgrims use female saint shrines to advance territorial claims. Moreover, this article has expounded on the ways in which different actors interpret scriptural matriarchs for the purpose of imagining a transformed landscape and nation. In building these arguments, I follow Mosse's (1985:17-18) claim that national movements present womanhood as the "guardian of the traditional order" as well as "the continuity and immutability of the nation, the embodiment of its respectability." With respect to Israel/Palestine, this particular role is filled by Rachel the Matriarch. Conversely, in her capacity as "mother of minorities," the Virgin is recruited to challenge and undermine the existing social order that the Jewish saint represents. Notwithstanding the antithetical roles of

Mary and Rachel, devotees at both sites venerate these figures as part of their efforts to resist the political order and redraw the landscape. All told, this article has focused on three principal topics: 1) matriarch tombs as venues for performing fertility rituals and evincing feminine symbols, 2) the role of female saints in the advancement of territorial claims, and 3) the relation between iconic female figures and the nation (the patriotic versus the minority mother). My findings shed light on the nexus between female sacred places, territorial claims, and local identity in Israel/Palestine, where religious affiliation is intermingled with citizenship and belonging.

Following in Huyssen's (2003) footsteps, I have described my two case studies as spatial palimpsests that fuse symbols and architecture with traces of the past, namely historical memories of these expanses. This outlook enhances our understanding of urban landscapes as lived spaces that shape collective imaginaries (Huyssen 2003:7). As per my findings, maternal themes and myths that are embedded in canonical sites can be used to launch or bolster campaigns aimed at upending political realities. More specifically, the evocation of ritualistic symbols that pertain to fertility/barrenness and motherhood, the mimicking of female body parts, such as the womb, and the veneration of relics, icons, and other sacralized objects facilitate the imagining of land ownership and help challenge a masculine-bellucose social order and the landscape.

These developments are transpiring amid a religious resurgence that is sweeping through Israel/Palestine (Ben-Ami 1998:171-175; Bilu 1998:24, 2010; Dumper 2002:9; Friedland and Hecht 1991; Liebelt 2013:260, 267; Luz 2011:75-78; Reiter 2010:158-160; Sasson 2002; Sered 1986:19-20; Stadler 2012:648-64) and much of the Mediterranean basin (Couroucli 2012:1, Dionigi and Couroucli 2012, Keriakos 2012:175). The local "Jewish pilgrimage market" is burgeoning thanks in part to generous state support, which is part and parcel of the Israeli government's policies on land tenure and planning, urban design, and the country's disputed borders. Another major element of this phenomenon is the appropriation, renaming, and reconstruction of ancient tombs that, in all likelihood, belong to the heritage of other ethno-religious groups. For instance, dozens of old grave sites that are worshiped by Muslims have been "identified" as the final resting place of saints from different epochs in Jewish history, even though some of these assertions blatantly contradict the archaeological, architectural, and oral record. Put differently, Israeli governing bodies and right-wing groups are redrawing the map of local sacred places. By dint

of government-sponsored facilities and infrastructure, these Judaized sites are becoming more accessible to and popular among Israelis. In this respect, figures from the Jewish pantheon are a vehicle for arousing the nationalist feelings of the majority population, which comprehends and identifies with the symbolic link between faith and nationalism. At one and the same time, a Marian revival is underway throughout the region. Drawing on a variety of celebrations, images, and mythologies, Mary is being portrayed as the mother of the timid, landless, and oppressed. At times of unrest, female themes like fertility and motherhood are increasingly broached within the framework of local politics. Conflicts in the Middle East are naturally being waged in the public sphere, as rivals seek to unilaterally transform shared landscapes. With respect to Israel/Palestine, where the borders remain the subject of debate and the threat of violence hangs precariously in the air, female saint shrines merit closer attention, for they betray the disparate imaginations of this land that are put forth by adversarial hegemonic and minority groups. ■

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Endnotes:

¹Many pregnant and suckling women are attracted to the Milk Grotto because they believe that its chalky white powder is conducive to fertility, smooth childbirth, and salubrious breast milk.

²Miriam Mizrachi, better known as Miriam the Laundress, was a resident of Jerusalem who many local Jews consider a sacred fertility figure. After her death in 1966, she was laid to rest in West Jerusalem's Giv'at Shaul Cemetery. For more on this site, see <http://sacredplaces.huji.ac.il/sites/grave-miriam-laundress>.

³Our Lady of the Wall is a new pilgrimage site less than 550 yards east of Rachel's Tomb (within the municipal borders of Bethlehem). The site revolves around a Marian icon that was painted on the Palestinian side of the Separation Wall. Ian Knowles, a British iconographer and former priest, was commissioned by nuns from the nearby Emmanuel Monastery to create the mural in 2010. Nestled among graffiti and novice drawings, the icon graces a corner slab of the towering, gray edifice.

⁴According to written tradition, Mariam Baouardy, a 19th-century Carmelite nun, endured harsh supernatural adversities, such as diabolic possessions and stigmata.

⁵This sepulcher is located in the southern Jewish cemetery of Tiberius. Once the shrine of a venerated Muslim woman, Jews currently consider it the burial site of the pious wife of Akiva ben Joseph—the renowned Talmudic sage (circa 50–135 CE).

⁶The cave purportedly houses the remains of Hanna and her seven sons. 2 Maccabees 2, among other texts, recounts the tale of their martyrdom at the hands of Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

⁷The burial sites in Tel Kedesh of Hanna, the wife of Samuel the Prophet, and Deborah, the Judge, are examples of this revival.

⁸The topic of staking a claim to land by reframing practices and symbols turns up in classic studies on natives. For example, Myerhoff (1974:15) interprets the Huichol tribe's annual return to Wirikuta (a mountaintop in Mexico's Sierra Madre Range)—the place, according to Huichol mythology, where the Earth came into being—as a prototypical ritual. Another riveting example is the Mohawk creation legends, which bolster the tribe's identity and buttress its claims to vast tracts of land (Harris 2002, LaDuke 1999:12). In her study on a complex Nepalese ritual, Pfaff-Czarnecka (2002:113) shows how a territorial dispute roiled the country's caste system and thus its citizens' identity. Nepalese give voice to their identification or non-identification with lands and local conflicts via the country's ritualistic realm. Insights from this field are also germane to other groups that enlist their cosmology to advance a temporal cause. A case in point is the hegemon–minority struggles in Israel/Palestine (see Yiftachel 2006:53-55).

⁹For instance, among the relics at Mary's Tomb is the Cincture of the Theotokos, which the Jerusalem Patriarchate believes is the girdle or sash in which the Virgin was laid to rest.

¹⁰Yaron Katz is the architect who was commissioned to renovate the Tomb and its immediate environs in accordance with new security demands and regulations issued by the Israeli Ministry of Defense in 1995. The historic site, a 40-by-60-foot rectangular structure, was renovated and fortified with thick concrete walls. The chamber holding the sarcophagus was divided into men's and women's sections. More conspicuously, the entire compound was surrounded by a heavily-fortified rectangular wall covering an area of roughly 600 feet. I am indebted to Katz for placing his sketches at my disposal.

¹¹Although most of the laity are Arabs, the Patriarchate's upper ranks are dominated by Greeks. For years, this imbalance has been a point of contention between the ecclesiastical leaders, who are backed by Athens, and the Palestinian flock.

¹²Among the more important developments regarding the cult of Mary in the 6th century was the establishment of the following feasts: the Annunciation, the Nativity of Mary, and the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Shoemaker 2002:116).

¹³Literally a “seat,” *Kathisma* refers to a monastic scheme for reading the Book of Psalms.

¹⁴In *A Well-Worn Tallis for a New Ceremony* (Stadler 2012), I elaborate on the differences between the Jewish streams in Israel.

¹⁵Given the site's burgeoning popularity among both observant and secular Israeli Jews, there is an abundance of pertinent material available in newspapers and online. I analyzed these reports and compared them to my own findings in the field.

¹⁶As demonstrated in the anthropological literature, a wide array of fertility rituals has long been performed at burial sites (Bilu 2010, Healy 2007, Kugle 2007, Reiter 2010, Weingrod 1990). Prime examples of such venues are tombs of goddesses in caves or dark rooms.

¹⁷A Greek appellation of Mother Mary, Theotokos literally means the one who gave birth to God. The word derives from the noun *theos* (god) and the ancient verb *tiktw* (a gender-neutral word for “I give birth”; see Rubin [2009:42]).

¹⁸The ethno-religious and national identities that are used in this article reflect the manner in which my interviewees defined themselves over the course of our discussions.

¹⁹Customarily adorned with icons and religious paintings, an iconostasis is a wall separating the nave of a church from its sanctuary.

²⁰Israel Abuhatzeira (a.k.a. the Baba Sali) was a Moroccan-born kabbalist who was reputedly capable of summoning divine intervention for people's hardships. This charismatic figure is buried in the Negev town of Netivot.

²¹The symbolic appropriation of a place is akin to letting it be known who the “real landlord” is. In his work on “symbolic power,” Bourdieu (1984:151-152, 156) demonstrates that religious sites can constitute a major symbolic battleground over territorial and border disputes. Accordingly, there is room for maneuver between the intrinsic nature and symbolic representations of these places.

²²Accessed from http://www.cbs.gov.il/shnaton65/st02_02.pdf on May 22, 2015.

²³Available for download at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/download/download-2009/>.

²⁴The road leading to the shrine is closed off on both sides by concrete walls. In addition, watch towers loom over the immediate surroundings.

²⁵In 1615, the pasha of Jerusalem granted the Jews exclusive ownership over Rachel's Tomb, which was subsequently reaffirmed by the Ottomans in 1830. Eleven years later, Sir Moses Montefiore was allowed to purchase the site (Selwyn 2009:44).

²⁶The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is the oldest institution of this sort in Jerusalem. Given its vast real estate holdings throughout Israel/Palestine, the Patriarchate epitomizes the connection between land and ritual. In fact, it is one of the largest non-governmental property owners in the State of Israel (Katz and Kark 2005:512).

²⁷Our Lady of Medjugorje, a Catholic shrine in Bosnia-Herzegovina, shares many characteristics with Mary's Tomb. Both sites belong to a minority religion, and their rituals stir passionate ethno-religious feelings (see Baskar 2012:51; Bax 1990a:64, 1994b, 1991; Herrero 1999:141-143; Zimdars-Shwartz 1991).

²⁸In her study on the Guadalupe celebrations of Mexican immigrants in Rome, Napolitano (2009:97) shows how Marian rituals help them rewrite their homeland's cultural memory of the harrowing Cristero War (1926–1929) (see also Gómes-Barris and Irazabal 2009:343, Coleman 2009:28-30).

²⁹Image accessed from <http://www.israelpost.co.il/mall.nsf/prodsbycode/752> on May 20, 2015.

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Foreign Language Translations:

Appropriating Jerusalem through Sacred Places: Disputed Land and Female Rituals at the at the Tombs of Mary and Rachel

[**Keywords:** Sacred places, pilgrimage, anthropology of religion, Jerusalem, sacred tombs, sacred architecture, land claims]

以圣地为名，挪用耶路撒冷：受争议之土地与妇女宗教仪式在拉结与圣母玛丽之墓

[**关键词：**圣地，朝圣，宗教人类学，耶路撒冷，圣墓，神圣建筑，土地权争议]

Аннексация Иерусалима через святые места: территориальные споры и женские ритуалы у могил Марии и Рахили

[**Ключевые слова:** святые места, паломничество, антропология религии, Иерусалим, святые могилы, святая архитектура, территориальные споры]

Apropriando Jerusalém Através de Locais Sagrados: Terra Disputada e Rituais Femininos nos Túmulos de Maria e Raquel

[**Palavras-chave:** Locais sagrados, peregrinação, antropologia da religião, Jerusalém, túmulos sagrados, arquitetura sagrada, reivindicações de terras]

سطو القدس من خلال الأماكن المقدسة: الأرض المتنازع عليها وطقوس النساء في مقابر مريم وراشيل
كلمات البحث: الأماكن المقدسة، الحج، انثروبولوجيا الدين، القدس، مقابر مقدسة، بنايات مقدسة، مزاعم الأرض