

Postcard from ... Cyprus

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As extremists destroy historic sites in Syria and beyond, one important shrine is thriving in relative obscurity, just outside Larnaca



The execution of [Khaled al-Asaad](#), the brave octogenarian chief of antiquities for Syria's ancient city of Palmyra, has yet again highlighted the campaign being pursued by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant against all vestiges of history and heritage. A few days after his murder last month, Isis used bulldozers to demolish the 1,500-year-old Saint Elian monastery in central Syria. Experts fear that Isis is speeding up its drive to destroy all such sites under its control. ("Nothing is safe," Irina Bokova, director-general of Unesco, told the Associated Press.)

Isis, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Somalia and before them the Taliban and al-Qaeda have not only destroyed artefacts and monuments of non-Muslim civilisations but also symbols of their own religion and culture, such as tombs, sculptures and libraries. More specifically Shia mosques, Sufi shrines, tombs of Islam's heroes and ancient handwritten commentaries on the Koran have all been burnt, blown up or smashed.

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Before these movements appeared, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi sect set in motion a relentless belief in austerity that laid low the historical sites of Mecca and Medina and levelled almost anything associated with the family or companions of Mohammed. There is virtually no building, monument or gravestone left in the desert cities where the Prophet lived and preached.

The accusation has always been that such monuments inspire tomb worship rather than the worship of God. The answer from millions of Muslims, including myself, who still aspire to keep their heritage is that monuments or tombs are not the subject of worship but merely act as intermediary symbols to help people discover God. So it came as a breath of fresh air to find that the mosque of Hala Sultan Tekke, one of the most important sites in Islam, is thriving in relative obscurity near Larnaca in Cyprus. This is the tomb of Hala Sultan, a relative and the wet nurse of Mohammed. She was a follower and a companion to the Prophet all his life, accompanying him on the Muslim migration from Mecca to Medina in AD622.

Her husband was a general in the Arab armies and she accompanied him on his invasions of Cyprus. During the siege of Larnaca in AD649, she fell from a mule and broke her neck, being buried where she fell. Around her tomb there arose a small but exquisitely built mosque that included living quarters, a cemetery and an imposing minaret in the Turkish style. "Tekke" means convent or resting place and later the complex was used to host gatherings of Sufi brotherhoods.

A woman's shrine of such importance is rare in the Islamic world and today it is an attraction for both western tourists and Muslims. Women are especially drawn to it; when I visited last month the stone benches in the garden were filled with female pilgrims, their heads covered, their hands raised in prayer. Some blow their prayers on to ribbons of cloth that they tie to the branches of a nearby tree. These are "manats" or favours asked of God, which, if granted, they promise to return in some form or other. It is a refuge for the spiritually needy and a shrine to serenity and sublime beauty.

The setting is idyllic. The buildings sit in a garden full of tall palm trees and elegant cypresses, beyond which is an ancient salt lake that dries up in the summer to yield an abundance of white salt. In the autumn it fills with water and thousands of pink flamingos and wild ducks descend on the lake.

In a place of such peace, it's hard to imagine the horrors being inflicted by Isis. Contrary to its propaganda, it is waging a war not for Islam but against everything Islam stands for.

Details

The mosque is less than a mile from the arrivals hall of Larnaca International Airport and just under three miles south of the city centre.