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**Edited by Karolien Nédée, Daantje
van de Linde, Erdogan Aykaç**

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Life beyond the grave: Qutb al Aqtab Rashid ed Din's steles at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam

Karolien Nédée

Introduction

In 1968 a department of 'Islamic Culture' was set up within the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam (then *Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde*). As a result of this organisational change, the collections of the Asia and Africa departments were restructured and reassembled from which the new department was born headed by freshly appointed curator Fred Ros (Ros 1993). Gradually, the collection was supplemented with objects acquired during field trips to Morocco and Turkey, while others were purchased from art dealers, such as Saeed Motamed who sold more than 300 items to the Wereldmuseum between the 1950s and the early 2000s. The focus of the current

article is a pair of wooden grave steles (WM-63112-1 & 2), purchased in 1974 from this internationally active art dealer.

The presence of grave elements in museum collections summons attention, not only because it implies the art historical and archaeological disintegration of a grave or cemetery context, but also because such decomposition may have religious or spiritual consequences. In this case, the steles were known to come from the grave of a 'Shi'i Saint'. In Shi'i eschatology, the cemetery is the main arena for the Day of Judgment and an immediate connection exists between burial conditions and eternal salvation (Amanat 2012). The implications stretch beyond the individual. Indeed, being buried in the immediate vicinity of a correctly buried Saint is of crucial importance to mere mortals as well. The anticipated guidance of a Saint during a resurrection scenario, in the past – until formal prohibition in 1928 – even led to the transportation of corpses to sacred sites adjacent to important shrines (Amanat 2012: 259). Therefore, in this article, I investigate why and how these steles ended up in a museum collection. How should we imagine their original context and to what extent have they been missed by local communities?

To answer these questions, I used different methodological approaches including object, archival and literature analysis. Additionally, I integrated

online records that have not been consulted before and illustrate the importance of local narratives and perspectives, accessible through these platforms. The first section introduces the objects and identifies the deceased, working from the textual carvings on one of the two steles. The second section traces his burial site, advancing several arguments to confirm the shrine's location in Bidvaz, Iran. The third section examines the insides of the Bidvaz mausoleum—recognised as a national monument—alongside signs of devotion on the steles in the Wereldmuseum drawing comparisons between both, thus reinforcing the hypothesis that the steles came from this specific mausoleum. The fourth section considers why the museum acquired these objects despite their origins in a holy shrine, placing this within the broader context of 1970s acquisition practices. Finally, the last section explores how the steles were exhibited and why provenance research had not been undertaken until now.

Through this case study, I intend to reflect critically on past, yet relatively recent collecting practices by the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. Thereby, I want to illustrate the importance of provenance research for objects that have been acquired through art dealers or collectors and are therefore not 'marked', by explicit ties to colonial agents, military personnel, or missionaries. The absence of a

direct link to the colonial past does not exclude a colonial acquisition context nor does it eliminate other possibilities of continuing unequal power relationships or problematic collecting practices.

Qutb al Aqtab Rashid ed Din: what's in a name?

Objects bought and sold on the art market are typically accompanied by very little documentation, therefore a closer analysis of the objects was needed to find provenance clues. The steles are inscribed with a poem that contains a name and a date of passing: 'Qutb al Aqtab Shayk Rashid ed-Din, 877'. This date and name contain a lot of information. They are the starting point of my research. The year 877 can be recalculated from Hijri era (AH), calculated according to the Islamic lunar calendar to the year 1472 on the Gregorian calendar (CE). The name can be broken down into two parts: Qutb al Aqtab and Shayk Rashid ed-Din. 'Qutb al Aqtab' is a rare title that indicates the highest level in the Sufi hierarchy of saints and requires more explanation.

'Qutb' is generally translated from Farsi into English as 'Pole', a designation used for the most perfected man possible, a person whose being and behaviour has achieved a level of perfection that manifests divine will and who holds the cosmic balance. 'Qutb al Aqtab' means Pole of Poles and

is given to a person who has reached the highest spiritual state possible. When one Qutb al-Aqtab passes, he is succeeded by the next. When conducting provenance research, this is valuable information, as this tradition results in precise and traceable lineages or golden chains (*silsile*) of which records are kept in written documents (*silsile-nameh*).

The second half of the name, Shayk Rashid ed Din, is shorthand for Rashid ed Din Mohammad Bidaavaazi, as researcher Johan ter Haar found out in 2013.¹ Ter Haar recognised this saint as the twenty-second Pole of Poles in the chain of the Dhahabiyya order. Although the museum already had access to this information in 1974, as can be understood from the sales list,² it was not until four decades later, that the person of Shayk Rashid ed Din provoked interest and research effort. The *nisbah*, a suffix to the name indicating a place of origin or ancestry, in this case 'Bidaavaazi', refers,

1 Ter Haar bases his conclusion on Gramlich (1965). This information was added to the internal database system of the Wereldmuseum (TMS) in 2017 by curator-at-the-time Mirjam Shatanawi.

2 Transcription of the name بطق یدلادیشر on the sales list (18-5-1973) was done according to German spelling resulting in 'Ghotbolaghtab Schaik Raschidedin'. Correspondence between Saeed Motamed and the museum happened in German, this article choses the spelling Qutb al Aqtab Shayk Rashid ed-Din.



Figure 1. Front of WM-63112-1, with carved poem and chronogram identifying Qutb al Aqtab Shayk Rashid ed Din and his year of death 877.

according to Ter Haar's suggestion, to Bidabad, a district in Isfahan County.

Ter Haar's postulation on Shayk Rashid ed Din's place in the *silṣile*, can be complemented by Devin DeWeese's (1988) article on the decline of the Kubraviyya order, one of the three major Sufi brotherhoods in Central Asia between the 12th and 14th centuries.

DeWeese positions Shayk Rashid ed Din as the principal disciple of Sayyid 'Abdullah Barzishabadi. The latter, a Kubravi brother, fell out with the new leader of the order who, according to tradition declared: *'dhahaba 'Abdullah'* ("Abdullah has left" or interpreted by others as "Abdullah has become golden"). Outcasted, Barzishabadi

created a new order, by name of Dhahabiyya, turning these winged words into a badge of honour.

As Barzishabadi's successor, Shayk Rashid ed Din continued this new branch of Sufism. He was active as a poet, authoring at least three known literary works, of which several manuscripts have survived until today. One example is a manuscript produced more than two centuries after his death in 1164 AH (1750- 1751 CE), the *Masnavi-yi Misbah* (Couplets of the Light),³ which is kept at the John Rylands Library in Manchester.⁴ Another work, preserved in its original version is the *Riyad al Afyadh*, at the Nizam College Library in Hyderabad (DeWeese 1988: 66).

Location, location, location

Although Ter Haar proposes Bidabad, Isfahan County, as the burial location of Shayk Rashid ed Din, in this section, I argue that the previously mentioned *nisbah* 'Bidaavaazi' more likely indicates the village of Bidavaz or Bidvaz, near Meshed in North-Khorasan.

In western academic literature, the end of Shayk Rashid ed Din's life, is unclear both in terms of place

of burial and year of death. While DeWeese was unable to retrieve hagiographic sources on this Saint, he offers hypothetical answers to both question marks. For what concerns his year of passing, DeWeese argues that Shayk Rashid ed Din was still alive in 895 AH/1489-1490 CE because in that year, the letter of spiritual guidance was passed on to his successor. Unfortunately, this year does not correspond to the year indicated by a chronogram on the steles in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. A chronogram is a letter inscription that forms a riddle and can be interpreted as numerals. In this case, it stands for the year 877AH/1472 CE and indicates the year of passing of Shayk Rashid ed Din. This year conflicts with the passing of the letter of spiritual guidance, eighteen years later.

However, for what concerns to the location of the burial place, DeWeese proposes two – potentially coexisting – possibilities: the cities of Khwarazm and Bidvaz.⁵ These hypotheses could be cross-referenced with online sources published by Iranian

3 Also known as the *Misbah al-Rashidi*, the Lamp of Rashid.

4 This copy, (Persian MS 285) can be consulted online. The Calcutta Asiatic Society also conserves this work under inventory number.602, Subhannullah Collection nr. 297.71/1, ff.9a, 11a.

5 DeWeese argues that the body, initially, could have been buried in Bidvaz, as it was Shayk Rashid ed Din's last workplace, and later moved to Khwarazm. This scenario is based on similar events happening to the body of a martyr by the name of Majd al-Din Baghdadi who was killed in Khwarazm, buried in Nishapur and finally moved to Esfaryin, due to Uzbek and Safavid anti-Sufi raids in the early 16th century CE.

authors for students, tourists and heritage amateurs.

Shrine-specific research by Mohammad Mahdi Faqih Bahr al-'Uloom (2014), leads to a tomb located in the village of Bidvaz and gives a short biography of Shaykh Rashid al-Din.⁶ Striking on this scholar's website dedicated specifically to shrine buildings, is a mourning poem, attributed to Shayk Shah Ali Esfariyini, son in law and successor of Shayk Rashid ed Din.

This poem corresponds to the (unauthored) text on WM-63112-1 in Rotterdam:

Aside from two verses that have become illegible on the wooden carvings, both texts are identical, as can be read in the above comparative columns. Bahr al-'Uloom used separate (non-cited) sources when doing his research that provided him with the author of the text. Additionally, he cites the year of Shayk Rashid ed Din's passing: 877AH/1472 CE, contradicting DeWeese's hypothesis on a later death after 895 AH/1489-1490 CE, as explained above, and reconfirming the date hidden in the stele's chronogram.

In sum the congruence of tourist and pilgrim information sourced on the

Transcription of WM-63112-1	Shrine website Mohammad Mahdi Faqih Bahr al-'Uloom	Translation by Prof. dr. Ashgar Seyed-Gohrab
اقتضای فلک مگر ستم است باز استاد این شدش تعلیم [illegible verses]	اقتضای فلک مگر ستم است باز استاد این شدش تعلیم	<i>Is the demand of the heavens' oppression, [that] the master turned this again into a lesson.</i>
قطب الاقطاب شیخ رشیدالدین مظهر نور حق و نور جسیم ناگهان عازم جنان گردید کرد رحلت به امر حق قدیم تا برفت از فنا به سوی بقا گشت تاریخ او بهشت نعیم قدس الله سروالعزیز و رحمه الله علیه	قطب الاقطاب شیخ رشیدالدین مظهر نور حق و نور جسیم ناگهان عازم جنان گردید کرد رحلت به امر حق قدیم تا برفت از فنا به سوی بقا گشت تاریخ او (بهشت نعیم) = 877	<i>(...) The Pole of Poles, Shaykh Rashid al-Din, Manifestation of the Truth's light, a luminous being. He set out for the gardens of paradise suddenly, Departing at the command of the Eternal Living. As he went from the transience to the permanence, The date of his journey was paradise eternal. May God sanctify his secret and cherish him, And may God's mercy be upon him.</i>

6 The author does not cite any sources, but may have consulted local shrine visitation guides, a genre that boomed during the Timurid period. Other primary sources include city histories, compendiums of religious sciences, biographies of Sufis, endowment deeds etc.



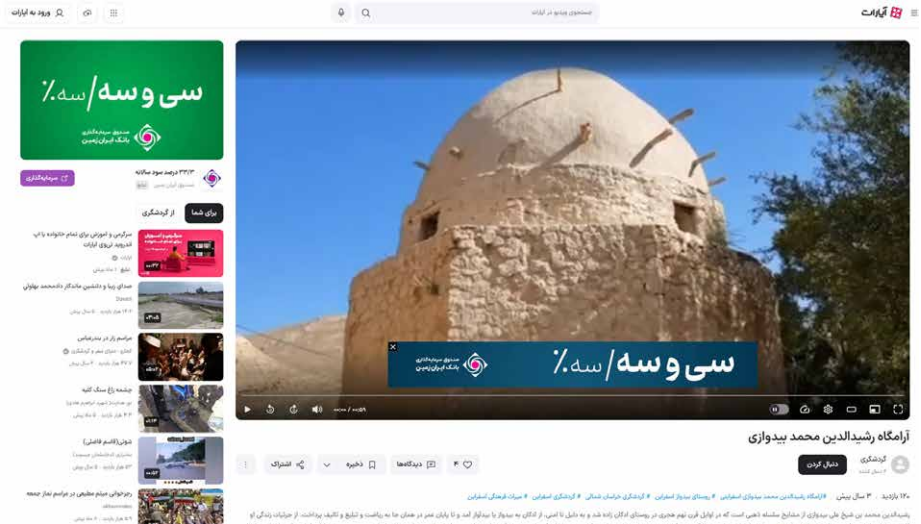
Figure 2. Back of WM-63112-1 presenting the Shahada, the Islamic profession of Faith, and an incised hand on the lower part of the steles.

internet with the textual information on the grave stele itself, offers a strong basis for the provenance of WM-63112-1 & 2 present in the Wereldmuseum collection. The steles originally were part of the Rashid al Din Muhammad Bidvazi Mausoleum, in the village of Bidvaz, Esfarayan County, in North Khorassan, Iran.

A national monument in contemporary Iran

In 1998, the Rashid al Din Muhammad Bidvazi Mausoleum officially became Protected Monument #2192 on Iran's National Heritage list. Although small and modest, the shrine is visited by tourists and pilgrims alike who provide

Figure 3. Screenshot of video content platform *Aparat* with a video uploaded by profile 'Tourism'. The video shows both the inside and outside of the shrine monument in Bidvaz ('Tomb of Rashid al-Din Mohammad Bidawazi').



considerable online content. Websites such as Google Maps, Wikipedia and the Iranian video sharing platform *Aparat* are helpful in offering insight into the architecture and features of a shrine building from a distance, especially in linking the steles to their original context. The walls of the mausoleum feature plaster inscriptions that add to the genealogical background of Shayk Rashid ed Din cited above by DeWeese. The building, however, has been stripped of its original wooden interiors. The Timurid period is renowned among

art historians and collectors for its exceptional woodwork, by master (*ustad*) woodcarvers (*najjar*). At least forty such artists have been identified through signatures on their works, reflecting the individual recognition they received (Aube 2017). Much of this corpus is associated with religious structures, tomb towers for prominent religious figures in particular, though few buildings have survived intact. An attempted theft at this particular mausoleum, prevented by attentive neighbours, gave reason to move the cenotaph, unhinge the original wooden

doors and transfer them to Sardar Mofakham Mirror House Museum of Bojnord. Today, basic wooden doors and a stone plaque on the ground featuring the symbol of the Dhahabiyya order, welcome the visitor.

Another striking link between the interior of the shrine and the steles, are roughly incised hands on the plasterwork and WM-63312-1 respectively. The symbol of the hand stands for a threefold love for (1) the struggle of martyr Huseyin whose hand was cut off (2) the skilfulness of the deceased and most importantly (3) the Prophet Muhammad and his Ahl-e Bait, the people of the cloak, also known as the five purified ones (Panj tan Paak), represented by the five fingers of the hand: Muhammed, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, Huseyin (Arslan 2008; Salikuddin 2018). The Timurid witnessed an increased importance of the 'Ahl al Bayt' and the hand symbolism, which can be explained by political reasons. Timurid rulers favoured religious scholars associated to the ahl al-Bayt to taxing privileges and land ownership, making it valuable for religious persons to establish and visualise their ties to the Ahl Bayt (Salikuddin 2018). The political and religious weight of the Ahl al-Bayt symbolism is still felt today, as the association of Shayk Rashid ed Din with the people of the cloak, is a quality of the shrine mentioned on websites enlisted below and pointed out in interviews.

Considerations in collecting for 'the Islamic Cultural Region' around the 1970s

The provenance research expanded on here, brings forward a link between the mausoleum in Bidvaz but not yet about how it left the shrine and came to the Netherlands. It is possible that these objects were in the hands of European collectors by the end of the 19th century and were separated from their context around that time. A lack of art market 'pedigree', which would increase its market value, however points towards a more recent decontextualisation, especially because several websites hint at attempted thefts. Was this possibility at all on the minds of the curators at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam at the time?

Some four years before the acquisition of the steles by Wereldmuseum, in 1970, the UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, addressed the international movement of cultural property requiring member states to regulate the international art market and heritage protection on a national level. Although this legal instrument can be criticised, not in the least for the imbalance it installs between the enforcement duties imposed on exporting countries, versus those asked of importing countries, it did spotlight illegal traffic and create awareness on

the topic in the museum world. While Iran accepted the treaty in 1975, the Netherlands, only ratified it in 2009. Newspaper clippings in the museum's collection depot, however, show that the curatorial staff increasingly and actively took note of art trafficking issues from the late eighties onwards and attended conferences on the topic in the early nineties.

In 1973, however, the Wereldmuseum sought to elevate its Islamic collection and was less preoccupied by import standards. The steles were a perfect fit for this goal: Timurid woodwork is rare and highly valued, and when offering these panels to the museum, the dealer Motamed, added verbally that the steles came from a small mausoleum in Mazandaran,⁷ the forested northern provinces, typically associated with this type of artistry. With pieces like this, the museum could compare itself to museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the *Museum für Islamische Kunst* in Berlin, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Art dealers like Motamed could help facilitate acquisitions under 'challenging' circumstances. A 1975 acquisition proposal for the Islamic Cultural region, several months after the purchase of the steles, for instance explicitly advocates an active collaboration with Saeed Motamed.

This collaboration was to be favoured over collection trips to Iran because this dealer was better placed to circumvent local rules: 'Collecting on locations is possible at times, but it requires a lot of preliminary research and involves overcoming the resistance of the population to cede Islam objects to unbelievers' (Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, NL-RtdWMM-4.68).

As such, this collaboration allowed the institution to avoid direct confrontations with local communities, thereby sidestepping potential cultural and ethical conflicts. The responsibility of engaging with these communities – who may have been unwilling to relinquish their cultural artifacts – was thus transferred to Motamed, the museum's primary dealer in Islamic art. Additionally, it proved financially beneficial, as Motamed sold artefacts more cheaply than in 'the home countries' which, according to the suggestions of curator Fred Ros, 'were becoming more expensive because as of this year, they were starting to build museums of their own' (Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, NL-RtdWMM-4.68)⁸ and the

8 Translated from: 'Hoewel de Heer Motamed aan veel musea in Europa en de USA verkoopt, hebben zijn prijzen de huidige exorbitante prijsstijging voor deze voorwerpen slechts ten dele gevolgd (steekproefsgewijs getoetst). Over het algemeen kan gezegd worden dat dergelijke voorwerpen op het ogenblik in Europa goedkoper zijn dan in hun thuislanden, dit mede door het feit dat er in het Middenoosten het laatste jaar vele musea in opbouw zijn.'

7 Notes in the collection database of the Wereldmuseum (TMS).

museum was in a strong position to negotiate, or even pressure this dealer. Evidence of this strategy appears in the notes from a Rotterdam acquisition proposal meeting in March 1995, which include the phrase '*onder druk zetten*' ('put pressure') (Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, NL-RtdWMR-4.68), linked to pricing negotiations.

Despite awareness on international legislation and changing ethical values in the museum world, the ambition to build a prominent collection on illicit import and frequent heritage thefts in Central Asia, somewhat blind sighted the museum for what in hindsight is understood as a potentially problematic acquisition practice.

Exhibiting 'Islamic art' in an ethnographic museum until 2015

Taken away from their original context and integrated in the museum collection, the steles were stripped of their individuality. Despite the fact that they were sold in 1974 with the name and year of passing of the person whose grave they belonged to, they were not noticeably researched by the institution before 2017.⁹ Rather, they

were made to serve a new purpose: illustrating Islamic Art in a general way.

The steles were displayed in both the 1994 exhibition *Dreaming of Paradise: Islamic Art from the collection of the Museum of Ethnology Rotterdam*, and the 2015 *Persians: warriors and poets*. Both exhibition catalogues draw the reader's attention to the traces of devotion left on the steles: 'On the head stela it can still be seen where beseeching fingers have touched the tomb' (Radtke 1993: 72). In order to enhance the experience of the museum visitor, a mausoleum-like setting was created, complete with a sarcophagus around the steles and strips of fabric tied to the bars of a surrounding fence to evoke a sense of a 'busy atmosphere' (Stadsarchief Amsterdam 31008.890). This focus on traces of devotion, rather than on the qualities of Timurid artistry or the poetic and intellectual traditions evoked by the poem on WM-63112-1, is unexpected. The subtitle of the exhibition evokes the idea of an art exhibition, which creates expectations about a focus on aesthetics and artistic traditions. The colourful marking of the beseeching fingers, however, rather calls to mind the realm of the 'ethnographic' and is reminiscent of a discourse known from the 'ethnographic' art market where insistence on patina and traces of use are perceived as markers of 'authenticity' crucial to the – mostly white – connoisseur's emotional

9 Mirjam Shatanawi, curator from 2017 to 2018, was the first to contact several specialised researchers, a.o. Johan ter Haar and Asghar Seyed Gohrab who looked into the text and the genealogy of Shayk Rashid ed Din.

engagement with 'ethnographic' objects (Steiner 1994; Price 2002).

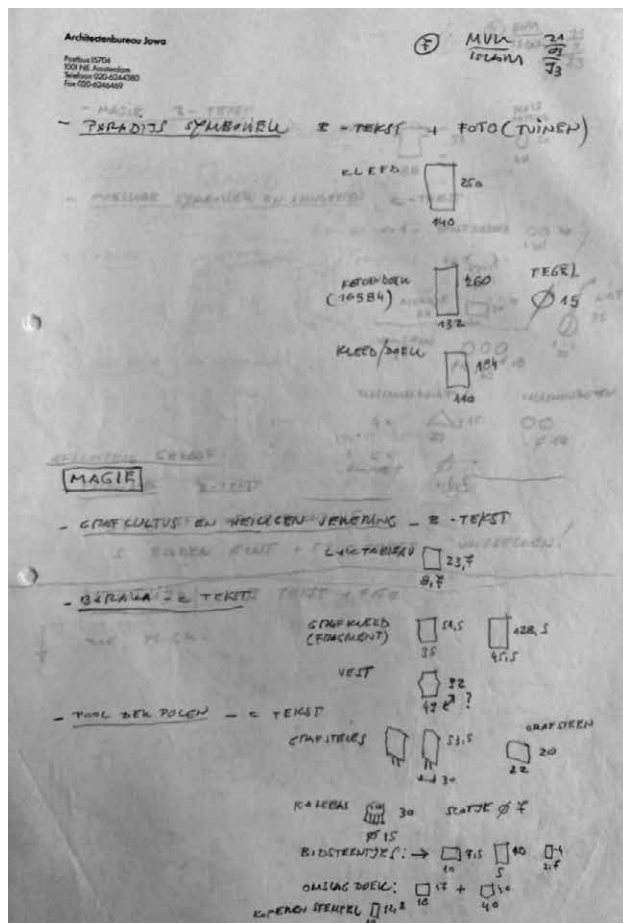
Similarly, their placement in *Dreaming of Paradise* (Stadsarchief Amsterdam 31008.890, 31008.1357) would have been subject to debate. The steles were situated in the subsection of 'magic' within the segment on customs and beliefs, dedicated to the topic of 'cosmic powers that are not always in accordance with Islam [and] [...] objects with non-Islamic influences, or with elements that are not integrated or respected by formal Islam' (Stadsarchief Amsterdam 31008.890). The contrast between 'formal' and 'popular' Islam is a 19th century division used by ethnographic museums in the Netherlands from the 1960s onwards (Shatanawi 2014: 20). It sets official, 'pure' Islamic faith as understood by urban, literate elites against popular Islamic superstition (Shatanawi 2014: 19–20). It is an attempt at avoiding defining everything from the 'Islamic cultural region' as Islamic while still approaching the region as a graspable whole. In 1973, Fred Ros, newly appointed curator of the Islamic Cultural Region described his job as follows: 'The task accepted by the curator of the Islamic Cultural Region [...] is to demarcate an area that allows Islam and its associated culture to be shown to the public comprehensively' (Wereldmuseum Rotterdam 1973:

'Verzoek').¹⁰ The steles exemplified a broader concept of magical thinking, within a framework attempting to present an all-encompassing idea of Islam. In practice, however, this division between 'formal' and 'popular' Islam is very difficult to sustain (Shatanawi 2014).

The way the steles were exhibited in the past raises questions on two levels. On the one hand, the categorisation stripped the steles of their artistic, historical, and religious specificity in favour of a comprehensive narrative based on 19th century 'western' ideas on Islam. On the other hand, at a time when the museum is critically reflecting on its past, the openness in attracting the visitor's attention to the devotional significance of these objects, until very recently, is striking. Especially because the practice of devotional touch remains common, and allows pilgrims to materially connect with the divine through the tomb of a holy figure, to seek grace (*baraka*), and to express devotion (Parsapajouh 2025). Today, displaying gravestones at the Wereldmuseum would likely spark debate.

10 Translated from: 'De opdracht die hij bij zijn indiensttreding aanvaardde was [...] een dusdanig gebied af te perken dat de Islam en de daarmee samenhangende cultuur aan het publiek getoond kon worden. (N. Afrika, Nabije Oosten t/m Pakistan)'.

Figure 4. Exhibition design plans showing the stele as an illustration on the category of 'magic' (Stadsarchief Amsterdam 31008.890).



Concluding notes

In this article, I have examined the provenance of two gravestones in the collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. This case study highlights the significance of collection research that allows for a better understanding of objects, resulting in a more precise

contextualisation and museal discourse around them.

Indeed, for a significant period, these gravestones were used by the museum to illustrate the so-called magical aspects of Islam, presented in an ethnographic framework that emphasised the traces of 'beseeching hands' without questioning whether the objects were in their rightful place.

The ambition to build an esteemed collection overshadowed considerations of provenance, trapping the steles in the same narrative for forty years or more. Rigorous research into such objects is essential not only to challenge colonial categorisations but also to recognise their intrinsic art historical, genealogical, and religious significance, reconnecting them to broader bodies of knowledge. In that sense, a more precise identification of the deceased, Shayk Rashid ed Din, and his biography enables a reconstruction of his familial ties, spiritual affiliations. The carved dedication to this person, also connects the objects to broader intellectual and poetic traditions.

The information I have gathered in this research, can be a step towards further understanding of under-documented Timurid woodwork and the work of individual master carvers. For instance, through collaborations with the Bojnord Mirror House Museum, who conserve the doors of the Shayk Rashid ed Din mausoleum which bear the signature of Ibn Nizam, a servant of *Zul-Jalal wa al-Ikram*. Possibly these gravestones were carved by the same *najjar*.

Additionally, I have attempted to underscore the importance of provenance research, particularly for recent acquisitions from the art market. Despite the frequent absence of documentation for objects acquired from art dealers, my methodology

of cross-referencing diverse sources, including academic literature and online records, has turned out to reveal crucial insights. As a result, my research has shed light on the original shrine context of the WM-63112-1 & 2, though the exact circumstances of their removal remain inconclusive.

Finally, this study demonstrates that the mausoleum, the original context of the gravestones continues to be valued – not only through legal recognition, as the shrine is listed as a heritage monument in Iran, but also through conservation and protection of other remaining woodwork by the Museum in Bojnord and through the narratives shared by tourists and pilgrims who document their experiences with the site. The presence of the grave steles in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam therefore raises ethical concerns, reinforcing the broader issue of contested collecting practices within the institution in recent times.

Karolien Nédée is a museum researcher based in the Netherlands. She obtained MA degrees in Law and in Social & Cultural Anthropology. From 2019-2020, she worked as a curatorial assistant on the project 'Oceania: A Sea of Islands' at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. At the time of writing, she was working as a provenance researcher based at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam.

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