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The Imprint of the Pilgrimage: 
An Ethnography of a Tattoo Studio in Jerusalem

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Several major religions exhibit complex attitudes towards self-mutilation and adornment. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity forbid marking the body and associate it with sin. Still, many people apparently have continued to feel a need for confirmation of their religion and their religious journeys by marking their bodies. This ethnographic study focuses on the recent situation in pilgrimage tattooing, utilising the local and daily processes of a tattoo shop called Razzouk Tattoo located in the Christian quarter of the old city of Jerusalem. The aim of this paper is not only to give a panoptic view of the tattoo studio but also to shed light on the transformations that take place in pilgrimage tattooing. In addition, I also want to demonstrate how the client-tattoo bearers legitimise their own tattoos through various narratives that ascribe deep semantic meaning to their images and words. To do this, I will first give a brief historical background of the pilgrimage tattoo tradition in the Holy Land, followed by a discussion of the transition from traditional pilgrim-tattoos to current trends, to create new specific categories of tattoo bearers.[1]

Key Words: tattoo, pilgrimage, Jerusalem, Israel, Palestine

Introduction

The Western academic literature on tattooing has existed for at least a century and covers a variety of topics and has expanded greatly in recent decades (DeMello, 2000; Halnon & Cohen, 2006; Irwin, 2003). Some researchers have focused on indigenous cultural practices of tattooing and the signification of life stages (Rubin, 1988; Hage et al., 1996; Kuwara, 2005; Thomas et al., 2005), as well as on global overviews of the dominant tattoo cultures over time and space (Friedman, 2015). Other research focuses on justifications for collecting tattoos and the meanings of the imagery selected (Atkinson, 2003; Sanders, 1989). However, despite this growing corpus of academic work on tattooing, few anthropological studies have been conducted which shed light on the connection of tattooing and the phenomenon of pilgrimage. Therefore, with this ethnographic case study, I aim to contribute to pilgrimage and tattoo studies by focusing on the phenomenon of pilgrimage tattooing through utilising the local and daily processes of a tattoo shop called Razzouk Tattoo located in the Christian quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.

The aim of this paper is not only to give a panoptic view of the studio but also to analyse the transformations that take place within pilgrimage tattooing. Through this study, I also wish to demonstrate how tattooed individuals legitimise their own tattoos through various narratives that ascribe deep semantic meaning to their images and words. To accomplish this, I first give a brief historical background of the pilgrimage tattoo tradition in the Holy Land, followed by a discussion of the transition from traditional pilgrim-tattoos to current trends, to create new specific categories of tattoo bearers[1].

Tattooing in Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land

Body mutilation has long been part of non-Christian cultures as a positive mark of identity, while in many modern western cultures permanently marking the body has been considered as degrading or deviant. Body mutilation such as scarring and tattooing often functions as part of a healing ritual, offering protection against forces that may cause injury or mark the admission of a person into a social group. Tattooing is a multifaceted, embodied phenomenon, not only in the concrete sense of literally inscribing layers of skin with outwardly visible pigment on areas of the body, but also in cultural, symbolic, and socio-psychological terms (Atkinson, 2002; DeMello, 2000). Perhaps one

1. In this research, individuals have given consent to have names and images published. All the photos are taken by the author.
of the oldest art forms known to humanity and the most ancient methods of expressing personal and communal spiritual beliefs, tattooing has persisted until the present day in various magico-religious and secular forms.

The Catholic Church frowned upon and eventually banned the practice of tattooing, using Leviticus 19:28 as justification for this decision. However, despite this ban, the practice of tattooing among the faithful continued (Sinclair, 1908). For example, many Crusaders and pilgrims on their visits to Jerusalem bought tattoos to prove to others that they had been there (Dye, 1989:521). Moreover, Armenian, Syrian, and Coptic pilgrims returning from the holy land acquired souvenir tattoos to commemorate their journey. In the 19th century, it was tradition for gypsies to tattoo these pilgrims, and tattoo marks became part of pilgrims’ social status. Dots in the shape of a cross on the hand or biblical scenes marked the bearer as a devout Christian. These tattoos also served magical purposes. Women choose Annunciation scenes to ensure fertility (see Picture 11), and some tattoos were placed on ailing parts of the body to promote healing. Muslim Arabs also tattooed themselves with permanent markings on the body though this was discouraged by their religious leaders (Carswell, 1958). As such, humanity seems unlikely to discontinue this very personal act of creativity simply because a religious authority decrees it unnecessary.

**Razzouk Tattoo in Jerusalem**  
(Tattoo as a family legacy)

For centuries, Palestinians have depended on pilgrims arriving from abroad for their economic livelihood. In many instances, these interactions have enabled the creation of new cultural processes and forms. Marie-Armelle Beaulieu’s (2019) essay on Jerusalem tattoos provides a classic example. In the post-Crusader period, European pilgrims became increasingly interested in the ancient practice of tattooing among local Christians in the Jerusalem area. Adapting their designs to cater to Catholic sensibilities (in particular the Crusader ‘Jerusalem Cross’; see Picture 1), local tattooists did a thriving trade among European pilgrims from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. More recently, this art has been revived in Jerusalem by the Razzouk Tattoo Studio, tapping into global trends in fashion, demonstrating once again how pilgrimage is continually reshaping cultural and economic life in Israel/Palestine.

For more than seven hundred years, tattooing has been the profession of countless generations of Razzouk family members. This Coptic Christian family originated in Egypt, but in 1750 an ancestor named Jerius, a Coptic priest, brought the art he had learned from his forefathers to Palestine and later Jerusalem.

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2. ‘Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord’ (Leviticus 19:28, New International Version).
3. In Christianity, The Annunciation refers to the announcement by the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive a son, who was to be called Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:26–38).
4. Carried by the Crusaders, the ‘Jerusalem Cross’ became the emblem of the Kingdom of Jerusalem from the 1280s.
With his wooden tattoo stencil and ink, Jirius Razzouk played a vital role in both continuing this tradition, and, when he came to Jerusalem, revitalising the tattooing of pilgrims in the region. Following the Arab invasion of Egypt, members of the Coptic community used to be tattooed to distinguish themselves from the conquerors. However, what began as a mark of persecution eventually became a part of the Egyptian-Christian identity. From there, the tradition spread to other Eastern Christian communities, such as the Ethiopian and Armenian churches, and to this day many Coptic churches ask to see a follower’s tattoo of the cross before they are allowed to enter.\(^5\)

Razzouk Tattoo claims to be the only remaining traditional pilgrimage tattoo business in the world. Wassim Razzouk, the current representative of the family, the owner of the studio, and an acclaimed tattoo artist, learned the art of tattooing from his father, Anton, who learned it from his father, Yacoub. Yacoub Razzouk (see Picture 2), Wassim’s grandfather, worked as a carpenter in historic Palestine while doing tattooing on the side. Most tattoo artists had other jobs to sustain themselves, as local tattooing was typically done at cheap prices and pilgrimage tattooing was only seasonal. British and Australian soldiers stationed in British Mandate Palestine from 1920 until 1948 became Yacoub’s main clients. The business accumulated from soldiers eager to receive tattoos allowed Yacoub to expand his practice from a makeshift studio in his home to an official tattoo shop in the Mamilla neighbourhood of West Jerusalem. However, just a few years after opening his first tattoo studio, some 750,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their land in 1948 in what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba (i.e., the catastrophe). Yacoub was also forced hastily to collect his tattoo equipment and abandon his shop and his home, moving to Jordan as a refugee for several months until the Arab-Israeli war ended. During his time in Jordan, Yacoub found himself tattooing an unlikely group of customers: Iraqi Christian soldiers who had migrated to the Levant to fight with the Israeli army.\(^6\)

Upon their return to Palestine after the end of the Arab-Israeli war, the Razzouk family began offering tattooing services from their home, and became the last remaining Palestinian family in East Jerusalem to provide a tattooing service for pilgrims. In 2016, Wassim was able to open an official tattoo studio in the Old City for the first time since the shop of his grandfather Yacoub (see Picture 3), designing the studio to resemble the original tattoo shop in West Jerusalem. The budding popularity of the Razzouk family’s tattoo studio has helped put their family’s tattooing history on display in the region. Islamic Art researcher John Carswell stumbled upon the Razzouks’ collection of stamp blocks on a visit to Jerusalem in 1956, and with their permission made impressions of their 184 stamps. The book Carswell (1958) wrote about the stamp blocks, ‘Coptic Tattoo Designs,’ is a popular book among scholars and collectors. Razzouk exhibits a second edition copy of the book in a display case in his shop and uses it as a reference to recreate designs for which he no longer has blocks (see Picture 4).

Despite the Razzouk family’s long heritage of tattooing, Wassim is the first to have pursued the profession full-time. Wassim also recently participated

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6. personal interviews with Wassim Razzouk between 02.01.2020-31.01.2020
There are two ways that the tattooist places the tattoo design on the skin. The first method involves using carbon paper to transfer the design from paper to the skin. The design is drawn onto carbon paper, sometimes cut in the shape of the design. This is then placed on the skin, which has been moistened with a deodorant cream. This method enables both the tattooist and the tattooed people to check the size of the design and its location on the body and make appropriate changes. The tattooist can also enlarge or reduce the design using a photocopying machine. The second method involves affixing the block onto the

in non-profit organization Artists4Israel’s ‘Healing Ink’ initiative, which offered free tattoos to Israeli victims of terror and war. Today, Wassim’s Jerusalem studio, ‘Razzouk Ink - Tattoos with Heritage’ is a popular landmark within Jerusalem, with tour guides regularly stopping to explain the studio’s historic and cultural significance on the way to visit the nearby Church of the Holy Sepulchre. (see Picture 5). Tourists take photos outside the Razzouk Tattoo sign just as they would at other landmarks in the Old City. People are increasingly becoming aware of the shop’s existence in various ways. For example, before arriving to Jerusalem, visitors read up about the shop, which is listed on several ‘things to do in Jerusalem’ kind of web pages and on YouTube. Tourist brochures at hotels, fellow pilgrims who have been to the shop, and seeing the Razzouk Tattoo business card at souvenir shops in the old city also serve as ways of promoting the business (see Picture 6).

Upon entering Razzouk Ink, one will discover a blend of stonewalls and exposed beams, lending antique character to the space, while the sterile tattoo parlour hides behind a wall. A museum-like case holds family antiques, and an exhibition of pictures on the walls offers glimpses into the family’s past (see Picture 7). Communication and charm are the keys to success at the Razzouk Tattoo shop. Wassim makes clients feel at home and comfortable. Customers patiently wait their turn, with the queue sometimes spilling outside into St. George Alley. To pass the time, they flip through a binder filled with different designs (see Picture 8).

7. https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5030875,00.html
Razzouk uses 500-year-old wooden hand-carved stamps of religious designs as stencils (see Picture 9). The use of blocks was important in the past, because they allowed the tattooist to work more quickly during the busy Easter week. They also served as an early form of flash art from which clients could select their desired patterns. These tattoo stamps, made of olive and cedar wood, include images such as St. George Slaying the Dragon (Picture 10), the Resurrection, St. Veronica and the Veil, Mother Mary and Jesus, and Christ Tied to a Column. Another popular tattoo is the Jerusalem Cross. After stamping the outline on the client, Razzouk uses a contemporary tattoo gun to ink the tattoo.

The tattoo motif designs in the binder book and style are fixed and are not often transformed by the tattooist Wassim. He has a strong identification with the tattoos that he makes. As a tattooist, he owns a tattoo simply by tattooing it. Besides simply being a producer, Wassim emphasises his authorship through his particular use and arrangement of traditional motifs and the theme of the design.
symbols tattooed on their bodies, proudly displaying their religious identities. According to Wassim, during periods of persecution, this same cross had to be shown by Christians in order to enter churches for safety reasons. The practice became deeply rooted in Coptic Christian traditions.

Having this decorative function, tattoos are often associated with exhibitionism. Although there is indeed an element of desire to reveal tattoos, there is often an equally profound desire to conceal tattoos. Revealing the tattoo has several functions, including showing the individual’s stylishness, identifying with a group to which they belong, and demonstrating their rebelliousness (Atkinson, 2002).

Erin, a 22-year-old Coptic Christian pilgrim I interviewed at Razzouk’s studio, who had migrated to the USA from Egypt as a child, told me that these tattoos are central to the identity of Christians, particularly those from the Coptic lands where the community is a minority. He was not planning to get a tattoo during his trip, but decided to get one because of his travel experiences in a visible location on his body. I am Christian [he told me] and I want others to know that. This tattoo makes our identity public. You can shake my hand, and on my wrist you can easily see who I am (see Picture 13).

Similarly, an Italian pilgrim I interviewed at Razzouk’s studio, who had migrated to the USA from Egypt as a child, told me that these tattoos are central to the identity of Christians, particularly those from the Coptic lands where the community is a minority. He was not planning to get a tattoo during his trip, but decided to get one because of his travel experiences in a visible location on his body. I am Christian [he told me] and I want others to know that. This tattoo makes our identity public. You can shake my hand, and on my wrist you can easily see who I am (see Picture 13).

Christianity, like Islam, also forbids tattoos, but, as noted earlier, that does not dissuade Coptic Christians in Egypt from continuing their tattoo traditions. Many pilgrims choose to get small crosses tattooed on the insides of their wrists or on the backs of their hands to show pride in their religion. Traditionally, Egyptian Copts would get tattoos during their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. and today they continue to use some of the same wooden stamps to get their cross tattoos. These stamps are stencil outlines that allow the artist to tattoo his clients at a quicker pace. Adults, as well as children, line up outside of their church to get religious
Turner’s definition. The individual leaves his or her established routine, voluntarily places themselves in a special place (tattoo studio) for a special amount of time where they give themselves over to the authority of a specially empowered individual (tattoo artist) who painfully breaks their skin and inscribes a symbol onto their body. At the end of this process, they emerge back into society newly marked. As one Anglican female pilgrim at Razzouk’s studio told me, she had turned into another person now that she visited holy places, and through being tattooed and she was immortalising this change. According to Wassim

A tattoo on the hand is the best certificate of pilgrimage because it stays there forever. It stays until the person is dead. It stays with him until the grave.

However, for some pilgrims the permanence of a tattoo can be controlled. As one American Catholic female pilgrim (26) told me:

I have this tattoo as a souvenir, but it doesn’t mean that I will always keep it with me. Maybe for a couple of years or may be more. But thanks to the cosmetic industry tattoos can be removed now. That is why I feel comfortable with the idea of tattooing. If it was totally permanent, I would hesitate to have one

Body markings can be marks of disaffiliation with mainstream society and visually proclaiming a sense of camaraderie to others so marked (Gell, 1993). Aby from the United States has been on a religious pilgrimage in the area three times, represented by the dates of each trip tattooed one after the other below a cross inked on her wrist.

Thanks to the tattoo I have here [she said] I feel the honour of being a member of a pilgrim community, different from the ones who never have had this holy journey.

Pilgrims come to the tattoo shop mostly in groups, generally with their friends or family members. The tattoo procedure is often a highly social act in which an individual manipulates and asserts identity within a specific social milieu. Getting a tattoo is often a social event, experienced with close associates who provide moral support offer advice and help pass the anxiety filled waiting time. As one female pilgrim in her 60’s told me:

My daughter and I have always talked about getting a tattoo together at some point in time. It is a nice memory, a permanent memory of Jerusalem, of a trip we took together; I like the

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Picture 13 Erin, a Coptic Pilgrim. With the permission of Erin

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the sufferings of Christ: the seal of Jerusalem remaining in the skin of the pilgrim as the wounds of the Passion on the body of the risen Christ. This would also explain the special attraction for the tattooing of the Cross of Jerusalem. The Italian professor Guido Guerzoni (2018) writes that a tattoo performed during a Christian pilgrimage is ‘a small martyrdom – a public effusion of blood’ of one’s faith. Many pilgrims told me that the pain of the needle is worth the sacrifice. For example

The pain I feel is like the pain that Jesus Christ felt when he was on the cross with his crown of thorns,’ said a nurse from Ethiopia, as a scene depicting the crucifixion was etched on her triceps. These comments by interviewees is in line with research within anthropological studies that shows that the tattoo has long been accepted as a rite of passage (Van Gennep, 1960, Kuwahara, 2005).

b. The second sub-category of pilgrims consists of Western pilgrims from Europe, United States, or Latin America (e.g., Catholic and Anglican Christians). These pilgrims mostly prefer small symbolic crosses or the Jerusalem Cross. For these pilgrims, as well, tattooing is a means of transition from previous states to a new one. Victor Turner discusses the importance of this social validation in terms of social drama and ritualistic transformation (Turner, 1982). Even the process by which one acquires a tattoo is rather ritualistic according to
Christian symbols, such as the chi-rho or fish (ichthus), were incredibly popular on epitaphs in Late Antiquity and into the medieval era. As Friedman points out, tattoos are not always a direct reflection of belief. As she remarks, they are no longer necessarily marks of faith, but rather they can mark travel experience or reference heritage (Friedman, 2015:??).

As Freidman suggests, a second category of people who visit at Razzouk studio consists of tourists who visit Jerusalem with motivations other than pilgrimage. Student groups, package tours, and curious backpackers who come to the shop do not acknowledge themselves as pilgrims, and they mostly get tattooed with non-religious patterns, such as the Silhouette of Jerusalem, the word ‘cool’ in Arabic, and other such patterns that remind them of the experience they had in the city. Many of this group have previous tattoos prior to receiving one at Razzouk Ink.

Father Boulus, a Syriac priest from Saint Marc church in the Old City, designs tattoos of prayers written in Aramaic on demand, which designs have become popular among tourists and pilgrims. Father Boulus visits the shop twice a week to translate phrases from Arabic or English into Aramaic (see Picture 14 & 15). As he told me:

Aramaic is the language of Jesus Christ. In this sense, now that you are in Holy Land where Jesus once walked and talked therefore having a tattoo of an Aramaic phrase is sometimes more original and meaningful for the tourists rather than a tattoo of a cross.
While observing the interactions at Razzouk Ink on a chilly and rainy Saturday in Jerusalem, I saw a group of students from Chicago squeeze into the shop to pore over sample tattoo designs. They were in Israel for a weeklong study abroad trip for their ‘Jerusalem: The Making of a Holy City’ course. For some of the students, it would be their first tattoo. For others, their second or third. One of the girls in the group settled on an ancient Coptic design for the back of her ankle, while a friend of hers asked Wassim to tattoo ‘Just take a breath’ in Arabic script on her waist (see Picture 17). Others requested the Jerusalem Cross, the ubiquitous symbol in the Old City, as well as at other ancient and holy sites in Israel. Some students had Wassim discretely put the symbol on the inside of their wrist, while others wanted it placed on their ankle, upper arm, back, or even fingers. On a different visit, I saw a young male Swedish tourist, who had read about the pilgrim tattoo art-form before coming to Israel on a group tour, chose an outline of a Jerusalem Cross (a large cross in the middle with four smaller crosses at each corner) for his arm and the Camino shell (see Picture 16) for his side (see paper by Kurrat and Heiser elsewhere in this volume).

During ethnographic fieldwork at the tattoo shop, I met many young Jewish tourists who came to Israel though the Taglit programme. The Taglit programme (Taglit being the Hebrew word for ‘discovery’), also known as ‘Birthright Israel’ or simply Birthright, is a non-profit educational organisation that sponsors free ten-day heritage trips to Israel for young adults age 18-32 of Jewish heritage. During their trip, participants in this programme, most of whom are visiting Israel for the first time, are encouraged to discover new meaning in their personal Jewish identity and make a stronger connection to Jewish history and culture. Since trips began in the winter of 1999, more than 600,000 young people from 67 countries have participated in the program. About 80% of participants are from the United States and Canada (Kelner, 2010). For those participants who came to Razzouk Ink for a tattoo, they choose mostly non-religious symbols and tattoo motifs, many of which were related with adventure and Israeli cultural pop art patterns. They did this in part to immortalise their adventurous visit to Israel with tattoos at Razzouk. As one female Taglit delegate, aged 29, told me:

I will have two tattoos. A compass, which shows the north. I am from the north of the United States. That means wherever I travel I will go back to the north eventually to my home. And a cat-rat. Because here in Israel, people treat cats as rats. I saw this pattern on a graffiti wall in Tel Aviv. This is what I will always remember.

**Tattoo Collectors**

This category of tattoo recipient mostly consists of local Israeli or Palestinian tattoo enthusiasts who wish to improve and enrich the tattoo collections they have on their bodies. Individuals in this this group are not just collectors in the sense that they are covering their bodies with one or more tattoos, they represent a subset of heavily tattooed individuals who desire the best art
I am a retired soldier. I travel quite a lot now. Every time I come to Israel, I have a tattoo from Razzouk. Each single tattoo means something for me. For example, I had St George tattooed in 2016, the year I retired from the army. St George is a military saint that is why I picked it. Two months ago, I flew to Istanbul only to have the tattoo of a whirling Sufi dervish. Now I have the lion of Juda from Israel. Last year I had two tattoos from Japan and one from Hungary. I always work with famous tattoo artists of the countries I visit. My right arm is designated for my tattoo collection.

Several of the people that I talked to at Razzouk studio discussed becoming collectors in terms of starting with just one tattoo and building their collections from there. The experience of getting several small tattoos as a start of one’s collection seems to be common, and it is only after they start to conceive of themselves as collectors that they begin to visualise their collections as conceptual and stylistic wholes. This becomes apparent when they start to cover their old, smaller tattoos. This cover work tends to evolve in either geographic (i.e., specific areas of the body) or conceptual patterns.

As Bourdieu (1980:253) argued, legitimate cultural taste, or the appreciation of high culture artifacts, ‘unites and separates’ individuals and announces their socio-cultural status. In this way, tattoo collectors demonstrate their cultural capital and using it, they construct themselves as superior to those with less cultural capital. The tattooed person selects an image or images, which image(s) can take the form of various objects, such as words, numbers and other linguistic figures; iconography based on religion, heritage, popular and other cultural influences; animal, plant, and human representations; or abstract shapes and lines. As one male tattoo collector, aged 57, from the United States told me (see Picture 18 & 19):

Picture 18 & 19 Tattoo collectors
Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to both present a descriptive study of the historicity of tattoo tradition in Holy Land pilgrimages and to investigate the transformation that has taken place in pilgrim tattooing traditions and the wide range of meanings ascribed to tattooing in the context of contemporary Jerusalem based on a case study of a deeply rooted tattoo shop. As shown here, the popularity of being tattooed in Jerusalem has gone far beyond that of the sole pilgrim and is gaining increasing popularity among tourists and local people with different motivations. The idea of the tattoo as a symbol of an intimate rite of passage in pilgrimage and initiation ceremony is slowly making its way into personal interpretations of global tattoo trends. If tattoos were viewed as markings of pilgrimage in the past, today they represent first and foremost the freedom of choice. Through being tattooed, many people take ownership over their own body and turn it into a type of temple - a canvas or their own private billboard. However, the body remains the most sacred surface to illustrate. Therefore, tattoos still have the ability to inscribe emotions tied to faith, heritage and travel.

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To reiterate, in this research, all individuals have given consent to have names and images published

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