Book Reviews

Nathan Hofer


Over the last twenty-five years, a number of articles, anthologies, and monographs have focused on Sufism in the “Islamic Middle Period” (1000–1500 CE). Much of this work has focused on Syria and Egypt, and the Mamluk period (ca. 1265–1517), in particular, has attracted substantial scholarly attention. This, in turn, has led to further study of the Sufism of this region in the subsequent Ottoman period, and Nathan Hofer now complements this work with his recent study of Sufism in Egypt largely in the earlier Ayyubid era. While Sufis lived and taught in Egypt from as early as the ninth century, Hofer argues convincingly that it was under the reign of Saladin (d. 1193) and his Ayyubid successors that Sufi thought and practice became firmly established and widespread in Egypt. As Hofer notes in his introduction (19):

> [T]he popularization of Sufism in Ayyubid and early Mamluk Egypt [was] the result of the socially negotiated production of different Sufi cultures at multiple socio-economic sites and across several political contexts. This production was constrained and enabled by the unfolding dialectic of structure/agency and mediated through the institutions of Sufism.

In support of this thesis, Hofer describes and analyzes several distinct Sufi collectives that compose the three sections of his book: the Sufis of the state-sponsored Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ khānqāh in Cairo, the Sufis of the early Shādhili order that arose in Alexandria, and various Sufis and their shrines in Upper Egypt during this same period.

Hofer’s first section on the khānqāh during the Ayyubid period (35–102) provides the most detailed study to date of the Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ, the first khānqāh,
or Sufi hospice, established in Egypt by Saladin. Drawing from manuscripts, waqf endowment documents, and a number of secondary sources in Arabic and other languages, Hofer argues persuasively that the function of this and other early khānqāhs in Egypt was to serve primarily as a link between the Sufi communities and the regime. The sultans founded and supported these institutions, along with comparable state-sponsored madrasa law schools, to propagate a Shāfiʿi-Ashʿari oriented version of Sunni Islam, as well as to replace the symbols of Fatimid power with their own. Though the original waqf deed for the Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ is lost, Hofer draws creatively from an endowment document for Saladin’s similar khānqāh in Jerusalem to describe and analyze the Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ in its various aspects, including the 300 Sufis who resided there on any given day, their stipends, law school affiliations, duties, and daily prayers and rituals, especially their Friday public processions. Hofer also cites documents of investiture for the chief shaykh of the Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ to demonstrate the ways in which Ayyubid and later Mamluk ruling elites promoted administratively a juridical oriented Sufism in their domains. Moreover, through the religious merits that were believed to accrue from supporting the Sufis and their institutions, the sultans and other ruling elites aimed to secure their legitimation among the populace as protectors of Sunni Islam, while preparing a place in heaven for themselves and their relatives. As for the Sufis in residence at the Saʿīd al-Suʿadāʾ, most were foreign-born Sufis who came in search of knowledge and a career in the religious-juridical bureaucracy, while others may have sought a more modest position there to support their personal religious devotions. But the Sufis of the state-sponsored khānqāh also performed public duties, and their rituals, processions, teaching sessions, and distribution of alms helped to establish and popularize a Sufi culture in medieval Cairo. Hofer illustrates these and related trends with a number of excellent detailed examples from his sources.

Another important element in the popularization of Sufism in Egypt was the rise, at this time and across the Muslim world, of the Sufi orders. Hofer focusses on the early Shādhili order in Egypt for this second section of his book (105–77) and, especially, on the efforts of Ibn ‘Aṭāʾ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1309) to forge an identity for the young order. In his sermons and writings on Shādhili hagiography and doctrine, al-Iskandarī helped to codify Shādhili belief and practice in forms that could be replicated and transmitted within a distinctive “textual community…promoting a group’s thought and action” (113). Al-Iskandarī underscored a particular lineage of this originally North African movement and its subsequent success as a pious movement in Alexandria and, then, as an established, recognized Sufi order of greater Egypt.