**Review Essay**

Stephennie Mulder


This book should be required reading on every graduate architecture and methodology course. Apart from its fascinating subject matter, it is exemplary in its method, its slow but compelling progression from the micro-level of archaeological reconstruction to the macro-level of political patronage and sacred topography. Its subject is a series of medieval Shiʿi shrines in Aleppo and Damascus in Syria that not only shelter the mortal remains of Shiʿi saints and their families, but also commemorate remarkable events, mark sites of manifestation, and house relic traces of pious presence. The shrines do not generally feature within the established canons of Islamic architectural history; such limited scholarship as exists is mainly descriptive, scattered across a range of more or less arcane academic publications, and (with some exceptions) was mostly produced in the first half of the twentieth century. The relative neglect of these fascinating monuments is due in part to the practical difficulties of studying them. These difficulties arise from the paucity of archival and contemporary documentation or, conversely, from the fact that descriptions and epigraphs survive where monuments do not. In some cases, modern rebuildings or remodellings masquerading as restorations add to the chronological and material complexities.

In her conclusion, the author aspires to have offered a model of how to conduct research on medieval monuments that “do not fit into traditional aesthetic categories” despite their political, religious, or social importance (269). A subsidiary (and no less ambitious) aim of the book is to highlight the archival value of architecture and material culture more generally, its ability to complement epigraphic and textual evidence where it exists and negotiate lacunae in the historical record where it does not (273). In its impeccable empiricism, its close attention to architectural form and detail, Mulder’s method equals
that of K.A.C. Creswell, the doyen of Islamic architectural history, but with the added benefits of linguistic competency, analytical sophistication, and conceptual ambition. It is in fact the marshalling of the widest range of data possible drawn from the disciplines of archaeology, art history, epigraphy, and textual analysis that distinguishes Mulder’s book. The writing is clear and confident in its approach without being overbearing, and is imbued with sufficient narrative elaboration that it never feels dry or dully empirical.

Mulder builds her case incrementally, patiently, steering a careful and deliberate (but never pedestrian or plodding) trajectory from studied analysis of bricks and plans of destroyed medieval monuments to a careful parsing of modern monuments that often seem designed to obscure their own antiquity, so often have they been remade or refashioned. She begins amidst a recently excavated ruin, proceeds to analysis of a series of intra- and extra-mural Shiʿi shrines in Aleppo and Damascus, and moves, finally, to a more general consideration of sacred geography and topography in medieval Syria. Mulder’s most innovative contribution is the evidence that she unearths for consistent patterns of patronage of Shiʿi shrines by Sunni patrons. The phenomenon destabilizes ahistorical narratives of perpetual Sunni-Shiʿi conflict all too familiar from recent media reports on the Middle East, but also calls into question assumptions about sectarian entrenchments and aesthetic difference that have been central to recent debates among historians of medieval Islamic art and architecture.1

Chapter one begins in the remains of a small shrine at Balis in northern Syria excavated by a team from the Syrian Antiquities Authority and Princeton University with which the author worked during the late 1990s, a modest structure that serves to introduce the themes and methods of the book. Medieval Balis was a center for Shiʿi scholarship and teaching, and Mulder demonstrates that this unprepossessing stump of a building was almost certainly a Shiʿi shrine that developed through diachronic acts of patronage between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. The shrine was just one (otherwise unattested) node within a network of Shiʿi pilgrimage sites that united the land of Syria with wider transregional sacred geographies, a network that loosely linked

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1 Mulder’s ability to challenge established wisdom was demonstrated in an earlier article in which she detailed the degree of continuity between the architecture of the Fatimids (the Shiʿi rulers of Egypt until 1171) and the Sunni Ayyubids who deposed them, continuities that run counter to recent hypotheses regarding an absolute distinction between the ornamental forms favored by Shiʿi and Sunni dynasties: Stephennie Mulder, “The Mausoleum of Imam al-Shafiʿi,” *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 15–46.