Abdülhamid and the ‘Alids: Ottoman patronage of “Shi‘i” shrines in the Cemetery of Bāb al-Ṣaghīr in Damascus

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At the southern terminus of one of Damascus’ ancient streets there is a gate known since medieval times as the Small Gate, or the Bāb al-Ṣaghīr. It was the old Roman gate of Mars, and was the main southern entrance to the city at that time. Around 550/1156, it was refortified by the great medieval general Nūr al-Dīn, and once again, a bit later, by the Ayyūbid sultans. Their renovation notices are still clearly visible on the interior of the gate in the tympanum of the arch. Exiting the city by passing through this gate, and moving south and then eastward through narrow market streets, a traveler will find that a cemetery comes into view on the left. This cemetery, eponymously named Maqbarat Bāb al-Ṣaghīr, is one of the oldest continuously-used burial places in Damascus (Figs. 1, 2). It contains within its boundaries numerous important sites of ziyāra (pious visitation), and among the eclectic mixture of graves—which include those of Umayyad caliphs, revered Sufi shaykhs, prodigious scholars, wealthy merchants, and other prominent figures from Islamic history—are a number of shrines devoted to some of the most venerated holy figures in Islam: the ‘Alids, or the descendents of the Prophet Muḥammad through his cousin and son-in-law, ‘Ali.

Simple in architectural conception and repeatedly restored over the years, many of these shrines have an illustrious medieval pedigree, and several have architectural or decorative elements that date to the Seljuk or Fatimid eras. However, for reasons not entirely clear, at the end of the Ottoman period a number of them were either renovated, or in some cases,
apparently created *ex nihilo*, by the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), as evident from foundation inscriptions still visible on their facades and further confirmed by interviews conducted with their historical caretakers, the Murtaḍā family. In this study, we will examine two of these acts of late Ottoman patronage. Of the eight shrines in the cemetery renovated by Abdülhamid, and others possibly also patronized by the Sultan, these two in particular stand out for having apparently been completely reinvented as ʿAlid shrines: transformed from their former status as ordinary tombs into holy sites for devotion and pilgrimage. The question explored here is how and why these additional ʿAlid shrines were transformed, or built anew, within the already-rich landscape of ʿAlid shrines in the cemetery.

The graves of the ʿAlids have been beloved from the earliest days of Islam, by Muslims of all sectarian persuasions. As Teresa Bernheimer demonstrates in this volume, ʿAlid holy figures were venerated from at least the third/ninth century, as reflected in the patronage of tombs and shrines from that period by donors representing a broad cross-section of medieval Muslims. As is well known, these shrines held a particularly important place within the realm of Shi‘i piety, and the performance of acts of visitation (*ziyārāt*) to these holy sites and the activities carried out there such as repentance, requests for intervention (*ṣhafāʾa*) or renewal of vows to the Shi‘i Imams—all of whom are descendents of the Prophet—have a central position in Shi‘i religious and theological experience. This is because the ʿAlids are the foundational figures in the common Shi‘i narrative of persecution and suffering at the hands of unjust rulers, a narrative that culminates at the Battle of Karbalāʾ in Muḥarram 61/680, when the Sunni Umayyads dashed hopes for the rightful succession to the Caliphate by ordering the murder and decapitation of ʿAlī’s son al-Ḥusayn. Ever after, reverence for the descendents of the Prophet and a desire for empathetic remembrance of their tragic fate have formed a fundamental aspect of Shi‘i identity and religious practice.

And yet, such devotion was by no means restricted only to Shi‘i practitioners. Indeed, some of the most ardent devotees of these holy sites have

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2 Teresa Bernheimer, “Shared Sanctity: Some Notes on the *Ahl al-Bayt* shrines in the early Ṭālibid genealogies”, in the present volume. Oleg Grabar, in “The Earliest Islamic Commemorative Structures, Notes and Documents”, *Ars Orientalis* 6 (1966), pp. 15-16, catalogued commemorative structures in order of their date of foundation. The third known shrine which can be historically verified is the Shrine of Fāṭima, the sister of ʿAlī al-Riḍā (descendant of the Prophet and the eighth Shi‘i Imam) at Qumm, apparently built in the second half of the 9th century.