Reviews

Stephennie Mulder


At a time of ever-rising sectarian tension, divisiveness, and violence throughout the Islamic world, a book that explores the architectural landscape of coexistence between Sunnis and Shi‘is in Syria must be a welcome contribution. Indeed, the book has been very well received and awarded the Iran’s Book of the Year World Award, a rare honor for a book on premodern Islamic architecture. One can easily understand this attention for, in addition to its timeliness, the book offers an entirely new perspective, even a corrective, on the shared piety between the Sunnis and Shi‘is of Syria within the context of shrines built for Ahl al-Bayt, descendants of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law ‘Ali. Although one might expect that devotion to Ahl al-Bayt and the veneration of their commemorative sites to be quite normative among all Muslims, this was not always the case, making Mulder’s efforts to get past legalistic “sectarian discourse” into the “deeper pedestrian realities” of coexistence all the more noteworthy. Equally noteworthy, even path breaking, is the author’s emphasis on architectural space as the nexus of inter-sectarian piety, distinguishing her book from others that have dealt with shrines and popular piety from a textual or juridical perspective.¹

The Shrines of the ‘Alids in Medieval Syria consists of five chapters that fall under three investigative sections that follow quite distinct methodologies, and a conclusive section that analyzes these investigations and broadens their scope. The first section summarizes the findings of an archeological investigation, in which the author participated, in the site of the 11th century Bālis in northeastern Syria, focusing primarily on an alleged Shi‘i shrine just outside the medieval city. The second section examines through architectural

and textual evidence two well-known Shi‘ī shrines in Aleppo, highlighting their inter-sectarian patronage in the 12th and 13th centuries. The third section takes the reader further south to Damascus and deals quite exhaustively with generally smaller shrines that had been largely rebuilt between the late 19th and end of the 20th centuries. The last two chapters present no new material but offer interpretations and expansions of the materials discussed in the second section.

The book therefore examines a selection of shrines in three different locations in Syria over a period of approximately one thousand years, a span that cannot be subsumed under the “medieval” appellation that is in the title. Whereas it might be argued that some of these shrines, especially those in Bāb al-Ṣaghīr, may have a “medieval” origin, most were in fact rebuilt between the late 19th and early 20th centuries under quite “modern” circumstances, a point that I shall take up later. The book’s title is also ambiguous in using the word “ʿAlid” to refer to shrines that most would describe as Shi‘ī or at least belonging to Ahl al-Bayt. Unlike Shi‘ī, ʿAlid could be seen as a less charged term that refers to places or peoples with a particular affinity towards Imām ʿAli, such as the ‘Alawīs of northwestern Syria, but is not otherwise used to refer to any other Shi‘ī sect. Its anachronistic use to describe the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt must therefore be deliberate, intended most likely to signal the discourse of sectarian coexistence that defines this book. Finally, the book’s title seems to suggest a comprehensive treatment of all the Ahl al-Bayt shrines in Syria, when the book in fact examines a selection of these shrines, mainly located in Aleppo and Damascus. There are of course numerous other Shi‘ī shrines in Syria—many more than even those tabulated in the survey map (p. 262)—and some of them, including Ḥujr b. ʿAdī in ‘Adra and the double shrine of ʿAmmār b. Yāsir and Uways al-Qarnī in Raqqa, are nearly as important as the ones discussed by Mulder. While no one would expect an interpretive book like this one also to be a complete inventory, the rationale behind this selection should have been more explicitly addressed in the methodology of the book.

In making her case for the inter-sectarian nature of the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt, Mulder offers a sustained criticism of the so-called Sunnī revival, nuancing its potential polarization in terms of aristocratic patronage and popular piety. She forcefully posits that the Ayyubid sovereign al-Zāhir Ghāzī (1193-1216) of Aleppo patronized the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt and encouraged inter-sectarian piety, inspired in these acts by his near contemporary the Abbasid Caliph al-Nāṣir (1180-1225). Linking Ghāzī with al-Nāṣir explains a great deal,

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