Review Essay

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Stephennie Mulder

The Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shiʿis and the Architecture of Coexistence. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780748645794, 297 pp., 142 illustrations.

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 Shi'i 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 Shi'i shrines by Sunni patrons. The phenomenon destabilizes ahistorical narratives of perpetual Sunni-Shi'i 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 Shi'i scholarship and teaching, and Mulder demonstrates that this unprepossessing stump of a building was almost certainly a Shi'i 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 Shi'i 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
     Shi'i 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 Shi'i and Sunni dynasties: Stephennie Mulder, "The Mausoleum of Imam
     al-Shafi'i," *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 15–46.

the monuments discussed in this and the following chapters and to which the author returns in the conclusion.

In chapter two, we move to the second city of Syria, Aleppo, located in northern Syria, a region with a large Shiʿi community. The chapter focuses on two *mashāhid* (places of martyrdom and/or witnessing). The Mashhad al-Muḥassin commemorates the stillborn child of the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson Imam al-Ḥusayn, while the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn probably marks one of the many sites on which the head of al-Ḥusayn was said to have rested after his martyrdom in 680, when his head was sent from Karbala in Iraq to the Umayad capital in Damascus. In 1195–1196, the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn was renovated and provided with one of the most spectacular portals ever built in the Islamic world, a polychromatic stone gateway crowned by a muqarnas semi-dome, and inscribed with both Sunni and Shiʿi texts. The gate was probably the product of the patronage of the Sunni ruler of Aleppo al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī (r. 1186–1216), son of the great counter-crusader and liberator of Jerusalem Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin).[2] Making use of epigraphic and textual evidence, Mulder convincingly relates Sunni investment in the shrine to a policy of ecumenism promoted during the reign of the Abbasid caliph al-Nāṣir li-Dīn Allāh (r. 1180–1225), nominal leader of the Sunni Muslim community, who acted as a patron of Shiʿi shrines in Iraq, attracting criticisms that he was in fact a crypto-Shiʿi (98).

One factor that might have come under more scrutiny here, since it is relevant to both the micro- and macro-aspects of Mulder's project, is an idea of Sunni Islam itself as monolithic that is often taken as a given. As the historian Richard Bulliet noted decades ago, "The mutual tolerance of different legal and doctrinal interpretations of Sunni Islam that characterizes the later centuries belies the bitter factional conflicts between Sunni law schools that marks the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries."[3] In fact, the idea of Sunni Islam as a coherent monolith largely emerged from these conflicts during the period in question; the ecumenism of the caliph al-Nāṣir and regional Sunni rulers who

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2 For an excellent survey of the architectural patronage of al-Malik al-Zahir, see *Yasser Tabbaa, Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvanian State University Press, 1997).

3 Richard W. Bulliett, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 173. For a discussion of how intra-Sunni disputes may be reflected in contemporary architecture and material culture, see Finbarr B. Flood, "Islamic Identities and Islamic Art: Inscribing the Qurʾān in Twelfth-Century Afghanistan," in *Dialogues in Art History, from Mesopotamian to Modern: Readings for a New Century* (Studies in the History of Art Series), ed. Elizabeth Cropper (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2009), 91–118.

professed allegiance to him should, therefore, be seen as reflecting a desire to forge coherence across a fairly fractured Sunni community as much as it was aimed at Sunni-Shiʿi co-existence.

Seen in this light, the transregional frame that Mulder convincingly provides for al-Malik al-Ẓāhir's patronage of Shiʿi shrines in Aleppo might be extended to include intra-Sunni competition. In her discussion of the foundation texts in al-Malik al-Ẓāhir's portal at the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn at Aleppo (90–97), Mulder notes apparent inconsistencies or even contradictions in the epigraphs, which juxtapose invocations of ʿAlī b. Abū Ṭālib (d. 661), the fourth caliph and first Shiʿi imam, and his successors among the Shiʿi imams with an inscription praising the Prophet Muḥammad, his companions, and the first Sunni caliphs, some of who had been enemies of ʿAlī and his partisans, and are consequently reviled by the Shiʿa. Such juxtapositions are not unique in contemporary epigraphy. The same conjunction of Shiʿi and Sunni sentiments appears in an inscription at the shrine of Imam Riza (d. 818), the eighth Shiʿi imam, in Mashhad, eastern Iran that records major renovations in 1215. The patron of these renovations was, like the patron of those undertaken at Shiʿi shrines in Aleppo, a Sunni Muslim: in this case, Muḥammad II Khwārazmshāh (r. 1200–1220), who hailed from the area of Khwarazm, now in northern Turkmenistan. Like the inscription in the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn in Aleppo, the Iranian inscription recording the Khwārazmshāh's patronage acknowledges the sovereignty of ʿAlī, while also including prayers for the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad.[4]

The background to the Khwārazmshāh's investment of the Mashhad shrine is provided by his rivalry with the caliph al-Naṣir, whose Sunni-Shiʿi ecumenism provides the broader context for the sectarian eclecticism of the Aleppo inscriptions. Muḥammad Khwārazmshāh's rapid territorial conquests threatened the hegemony of the caliph; although a Sunni, in 1217, he declared the caliphate defunct, elevated a descendant of Imam ʿAlī, and prepared to march on Baghdad to install him in place of the caliph al-Nāṣir. It is as prelude to these events that the Khwārazmshāh's patronage at the shrine of Imam Riza, and its epigraphic representation, should be seen viewed. Imam Riza was reportedly murdered at the behest of an earlier Abbasid caliph; his tomb is, until today, one of the most important shrines of Shiʿism, so ideally situated to advertise the Khawārzmshāh's patronage of the Shiʿa. If, therefore, ecumenism in the age of al-Naṣir Muḥammad provides a transregional frame for understanding

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4 Discussed by A. Azfar Moin, "Sovereign Violence: Temple Destruction in India and Shrine Desecration in Iran and Central Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57.2 (2015): 482–483.

Sunni patronage of Shiʻi shrines in Aleppo and elsewhere, its instrumentaliza-
tion as part of contemporary intra-Sunni rivalry is no less relevant.

As this suggests, cross-sectarian patronage in the medieval Islamic world was
often a product of realpolitik, with the result that the landscape of conflict or co-
existence could change quite dramatically, even over relatively short periods.
This worked both negatively and positively, to preclude or promote the kind of
ecumenism that is Mulder's topic. As she notes, the co-existence suggested by
the use of the Shiʻi formula for the call to prayer from the minarets of Aleppo
was terminated by the Sunni ruler of Aleppo, Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zangi (Zankī, d.
1174) when he wanted to ingratiate himself with the Sunni prince of Damascus.
Both Nūr al-Dīn and his father before him had earlier patronized the Shiʻi
shrines of Aleppo (75). The change came as Nūr al-Dīn reunited north and south
Syria, promoting himself as a champion of orthodoxy battling both Christian
Franks and "heterodox" Muslims (including Shiʻis). As early as 1150–1151, Nūr
al-Dīn built a madrasa in Aleppo, today known as the Qastal-Shuʻaybiyya
(an odd omission from Mulder's book), whose Qurʼanic inscriptions were
imbued with anti-Shiʻi sentiments; a second madrasa founded by Nūr al-Dīn
seems to have been established on the site of an appropriated Shiʻi mosque.[5]

Co-existence does not imply constancy: the tolerance or even patronage of
Shiʻism in northern Syria by Sunni rulers could and did shift over time, and
itself always co-existed with moments of tension and conflict. Mulder is cor-
rectly and convincingly reacting against an historiographic tradition that has
put more stress on conflict than co-existence, so her emphasis on ecumen-
ism is both necessary and laudable. The challenge for those seeking to build
upon her pioneering work will be to take account of the twists and turns that
complicate and nuance the story of inter-sectarian patronage, historicizing its
regional and transregional dimensions in ways that avoid lurching from nar-
ratives of dystopia to visions of utopia or vice versa. In this, Mulder's careful
historicism points the way.

Chapter three builds upon the preceding discussion of cross-sectarian
patronage in Aleppo, taking us south to Damascus and the extensive necropo-
lis at the Bāb al-Saghīr (the Little Gate), located to the south of the city on
the road that pilgrims would have taken to Mecca. In her exploration of the
Shiʻi shrines in the cemetery, Mulder is at pains to complicate the notion
of Damascus as a Sunni city, highlighting their role as sites of pilgrimage
and patronage, not only for the Shiʻi community. The medieval sources are
largely silent on these shrines, permitting Mulder to engage a running theme:

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5   Julian Raby, "Nur al-Din, the Qastal al-Shuʻaybiyya and the 'Classical Revival,'" *Muqarnas*
    21 (2004): 296–297.

the value of architecture for narrating histories of "sectarian exchange and interaction that the textual sources alone cannot" (117–118). This forms part of an understated but consistent critique of logocentrism in the study of Islamic architecture (249), the primacy often afforded texts, which may or may not record patterns of patronage across intra-Muslim confessional boundaries. Once again, the epigraphic and architectural forensics through which Mulder reconstructs the history of these shrines, including confusion and inconsistencies over time regarding the identification of the incumbents of some of the tombs, is often quite Holmesian in its deductive brilliance.

Chapter four analyzes four discrete extra- and intra-mural Shiʿi shrines scattered in and around the medieval city of Damascus, among them some of the most important Shiʿi pilgrimage sites in Syria. Their importance means that they have attracted significant patronage over time, with the result that the current appearance preserves little of their original form. Conversely, one no longer exists and is known only from texts. Some transformations of the extant shrines are recent, reflecting the promotion of Iranian tourism in Syria (and Shiʿi pilgrimage to the shrines of Damascus in particular) by the Assad regime, which has close ties to Iran. This has resulted in the material transformation of the shrines to bring them into conformity with Iranian aesthetic norms; today they are revetted with tilework and interior mirror-work (Pers. *āyneh kārī*) that was never part of the traditional Syrian decorative repertoire.

Faced with the difficulties of parsing the history of these living shrines, and of reconstructing the development of those no longer extant, the forensic method championed earlier is deployed to excellent effect. However, here it is textual archaeology rather than excavation or architectural analysis that enables the reconstruction of the shrines and their histories. The author's ability to extract data from medieval texts while simultaneously reconstructing their socio-political contexts, and the ways in which these contexts inflect their informational content, is impressively nuanced. Moreover, the move from architecture to text is important, for despite the author's stated intention to foreground the archival value of architecture itself, she demonstrates that the stratigraphic approach championed in her earlier discussion of archaeological sites and standing monuments is no less applicable to the study of texts. More importantly, taken together, chapters three and four constitute a pragmatic demonstration of the need to consider textual sources and material culture in concert when writing histories for which limited primary sources exist.

One slight oddity of the discussion is its failure to engage in any detail with the contemporary Sunni shrines of Syria. When it comes to Sunni investments in the Shiʿi shrines of Aleppo discussed in chapter two, for example, it would have been useful to have a sense of what we know about Sunni patronage as

a whole, and whether one might discern differences in patterns of patronage at Sunni and Shi'i shrines. The lack of engagement with Sunni shrines feels particularly acute here in chapter four, when it comes to the discussion of the shrine built to contain the head of Imam al-Ḥusayn in the Friday Mosque of Damascus (201–220). The same mosque contains a celebrated shrine of the head of John the Baptist, a shrine that pre-dates Islam and is venerated by pilgrims of various sectarian persuasions. Although briefly mentioned in the conclusion (256–257), it would have provided an obvious point of extended comparison. The tight focus on 'Alid shrines precludes this, although such a comparative approach might have elucidated further complexities of patronage associated with the shrines under discussion.

In her final chapter, the most ambitious of the book, the author builds on her regionally focused analysis of individual shrines in the preceding chapters, analyzing their ability to both consolidate and materialize a sacred geography inscribed upon the topography of Syria. As Mulder notes earlier, many of the shrines underwent a "repeated and intensive founding, discovery and renewal" (57) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the period of Crusade, counter-Crusade and what modern scholarship has dubbed the "Sunni Revival." These material investments reified networks of devotion, piety and pilgrimage (*ziyāra*) that (re)sacralized the land in ways that recall earlier processes of Islamicization usually discussed in exclusively Sunni terms. One striking feature of the phenomenon is the frequency with which the sacred was revealed materially through the discovery and enshrinement of inscriptions or resonant stones with (often ambiguous) reliquary value (224–226). Both kinds of artifacts had featured in earlier Sunni attempts to crystallize a Syrian sacred geography; they reappear during processes of (re)sacralization associated with the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[6] The role of such material discoveries in validating Shi'i claims to sites of sacrality should probably, therefore, be located within diachronic Syrian history of sacralization and validation.

The centrality of materiality extended to the devotional practices and rituals undertaken in the shrines that are Mulder's subject. Yet, despite the emphasis on "a material conceptualization of the sacred" (248) in the final chapter, one could come away from the book with very little sense of what actually went on in these shrines—how exactly pilgrims manifested their devotion to the saints whose traces they enshrined, and the material practices that mediated

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6   Finbarr B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies in the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 105–106, 218 n. 151. See also Garth Fowden, Review of Zbigniew T. Fiema and Jaakko Frösén, *Petra—the Mountain of Aaron*. The Finnish Archaeological Project in Jordan. Volume I: the Church and the Chapel, *The Classical Review* 60.2 (2010): 566–568.

both blessing and devotion.[7] At a time when those very practices are coming under pressure from attempts to enforce proscriptive orthodoxies, this is unfortunate.[8] All the more so since the later patronage of some of the tombs and shrines discussed in this book can be directly related to modern debates about the orthodoxy of shrine visitation.

The restoration of the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn in Aleppo (chapter two), and the rebuilding or restoration of at least five ʿAlid tombs in the Bāb al-Saghīr cemetery in Damascus (chapter three) by the Ottoman sultan Abdul-Hamid II (r. 1876–1909), reigning as caliph, the nominal leader of the Sunni Muslim community, should be understood within this context. Abdul-Hamid's activities can be seen as part of a broader ecumenical, programmatic, and pragmatic attempt to bolster forms of popular devotion at a time when the practices associated with it were coming under fire a number of fronts. On the one hand, Sunni reformers and critics of the Ottomans centered in Egypt such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), and Rashid Ridaʿ (d. 1935), the so-called Salafiyya, were attempting to curb practices that were seen as rooted in superstition and incompatible with endeavors to modernize Islam. At the same time, tomb visitation and relic veneration, practices found in both Sunni and Shiʿi Islam, but often ascribed to Shiʿa in particular, were coming under direct attack from ultra-conservative Sunni Muslims in the Arabian peninsula, a legacy reflected in recent acts of shrine destruction by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In the face of these threats, conservative members of the traditional ʿulamāʾ, the religious classes, loyal to the Ottoman sultan, and often associated with Sufi orders, rallied to the support of relics, shrines, and Ottomans. Resistance to reform was particularly strong in Lebanon and Syria, where conservatives attempted to uphold the status quo, promoting the Ottoman sultan as a renewer (*mujaddīd*) at a time of maximum stress, a role manifest in his patronage of tombs or shrines of prophets and saints.[9] In other

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7   See, among others, Josef W. Meri, "A Late Medieval Syrian Pilgrimage Guide: Ibn al-Ḥawrānī's *Al-Ishārāt ilā Amākin al-Ziyārāt* (*Guide to Pilgrimage Places*)," *Medieval Encounters* 7.1 (2001): 3–78; Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); James Grehan, *Twilight of the Saints: Everyday Religion in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

8   Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek. *From Visiting Graves to Their Destruction. The Question of* Ziyara *through the. Eyes of Salafis*, Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Crown Paper 2, July 2009, available online at http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/cp/CP2.pdf (accessed 28 July 2015).

9   Typical in this respect was the Beirut-based Palestinian shaykh and celebrated Sunni scholar Yusuf ibn Ismaʿil al-Nabhani (d. 1932), a conservative supporter of the Ottoman caliphate, who publicly praised the support given by Abdul Hamid II to the shrines and tombs of

words, one can point to a broader socio-political context for the patronage of the Shi'i shrines of Syria by the Ottoman sultan in the early twentieth century, one directly relevant to the current atrocities being committed against believers of all persuasions and their shrines in Syria and Iraq.

This contemporary context raises its head in Mulder's conclusion, which mentions that some of the shrines so carefully documented in the book have now been damaged or destroyed; the author has in fact been active in publicizing the destruction of antiquities during the ongoing conflict.[10] That it appears at a moment when Syria is in the throes of a popular uprising, transformed into violent civil war in which intra-sectarian violence has been instrumentalized and promoted, wittingly or otherwise, by various regional powers (including the United States and its allies) renders Stephennie Mulder's work both poignant and timely. Given its many strengths, I have no doubt that it will be the basic reference text on the subject for many years to come, and rightly so.

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prophets and saints throughout the Ottoman empire: Amal Ghazal, "Sufism, Ijtihād and Modernity, Yūsuf al-Nabhānī in the Age of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd II," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 19 (2001): 239–271.

10   Stephennie Mulder, "The Blood Antiquities Fueling ISIL," available online at http://www .aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/11/blood-antiquities-funding-isil-201411911394 8461658.html (accessed 1 March 2015).