Book Review

Stephennie Mulder, *The Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shiʿis and the Architecture of Coexistence,* Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 320 pages. ISBN: 9780748645794, Price: £75.00 (cloth).

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By surveying and interpreting major ʿAlid shrines in Syria from the eleventh century to today, Stephennie Mulder has produced a timely work of great value and insight. Based on over a decade of fieldwork in Syria and extensive engagement with Arabic texts, *Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria* makes a convincing case for the emergence of an architecture of ecumenism between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, in which Muslims of different sectarian orientations came together to mourn, commemorate, and supplicate descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad through his son-in-law ʿAlī (the ʿAlids). Mulder argues that the form this ecumenical architecture took – the shrine (*mashhad*) – is uniquely suited to inclusive and polyvalent devotional practices, but at the same time, because of its very flexibility and popularity, presents a particular challenge to the architectural historian. The buildings Mulder analyzes in this book have been, with only a couple of exceptions, used continuously as ritual spaces from the medieval period to the present. Studying such spaces requires an innovative methodology, and one of Mulder's many strengths is her willingness to go beyond what has been thought of as the purview of the medievalist or archaeologist. She does not hesitate to seek out oral histories, written texts, and the lived experience of present-day Muslims as windows onto the origins, meanings, and transformations of shrines over the centuries.

The book is divided into two parts: four chapters in which she lays out empirical evidence for the history of ʿAlid shrines in Bālis (a site on the Euphrates in northern Syria), Aleppo, and Damascus and a fifth chapter in which she explores the theoretical and historiographical implications of her findings. The chapter on Bālis allows Mulder to put her skills and experience as an archaeologist to good use. Abandoned as a Mongol army advanced in 1259, Bālis may have been home to

as many as three ʿAlid shrines in the medieval period, but the one in question, excavated by a Princeton-Syrian team over 2005-2009 for which Mulder served as ceramicist, yields important evidence as to the dynamic and varied usage of such structures over the centuries. Mulder argues that the shrine was dedicated to ʿAlī himself and was not the original location, as previously believed, of a well-known set of stucco panels inscribed to al-Khiḍr now housed in the Damascus Museum. She also suggests that the one patron of the site whose name has been preserved in the written record was a Sunni. Thus, the shrine at Bālis acts as a "template" or "prototype" for the other shrines discussed in the book, a site that exhibits signs of intensive and changing usage over an extended period (in this case about 250 years); that was dedicated not only to an ʿAlid but to *the* ʿAlid, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib himself; and that was patronized at least once by a Sunni, indicating its wide appeal.

The next chapter on two of the most important ʿAlid shrines in Syria, located just outside Aleppo, is perhaps the most impressive in the book. Entitled "Aleppo: An Experiment in Islamic Ecumenism," it is an important reminder of Aleppo's long history as a city with an influential and prosperous Shiʿi population and of the often overlooked chapter in that history in which a Sunni Ayyubid prince in Aleppo, al-Ẓāhir Ghāzī (r. 1186-1216), following the example of a Sunni Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Nāsir (r. 1180-1225), actively pursued a policy of rapprochement between Sunnis and Shiʿis in which an architecture of ecumenism – namely ʿAlid shrines – played a pivotal part. One of the most effective analytic and methodological interventions of the chapter is Mulder's re-reading of a set of inscriptions on the entrance to the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn, located about 1.5 km south of the city. This elaborate and imposing portal was constructed in 1195-1196 and likely commissioned by al-Ẓāhir himself. Mulder's interpretation of the three inscriptions on the portal persuasively overturns previous interpretations in which scholars have suggested that one of the inscriptions represents a Sunni attempt to "neutralize" or overshadow the Shiʿi implications of the other two. Mulder's methodology entails not just a close reading of the words of the inscriptions but an analysis of their physical and aesthetic arrangement. She argues that instead of one inscription cancelling out the other two, all three of them "communicated a single message. And the vehicle of that unification was, in fact, the frieze of *miḥrāb* images that decorates the portal, which consists of a series of lamps hanging within intricately carved, multilobed niches" (98). Mulder pays attention not only to the physical relationship between the inscriptions and the aesthetic elements of the portal, but also the iconographic meaning of those elements – lamps as symbols of divine light associated with ʿAlī and the twelve imams.[1] Moreover, she stresses the experience of reading the inscriptions *in situ*: "For viewers, the process of actively reading the inscriptions, guided by the *miḥrāb* image, literally integrated the two opposing viewpoints on figures revered

1. Mulder elaborates on this argument in a recent book chapter: "Seeing the Light: Enacting the Divine at Three Medieval Syrian Shrines," in *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, ed. David Roxburgh (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 89-109.

by the different sects. It spoke to viewers, worshippers and pilgrims as a unifying rhetorical device intended to emphasize the possibility for coexistence and respect between the two seemingly opposite positions" (98). This insightful argument about a single portal is applicable to the book as a whole – physical structures, written texts, and lived experience coming together to illuminate a unifying sacred landscape in medieval Syria.

The next two chapters discuss ʿAlid shrines in Damascus. These are in many ways the most challenging chapters of the book, as most of the shrines are located in densely populated areas and the way they look today is largely the product of twentieth-century reconstruction. The structures themselves, therefore, provide very little physical evidence for their medieval incarnations. Mulder approaches this problem by vigorously mining written texts from the eleventh century on for evidence of foundation, location, patronage, usage, and renovation over the years. Unfortunately the texts themselves often offer vague or conflicting information, and Mulder's discussion of them is occasionally difficult to follow. In chapter four, the discussion mirrors the sources by confusing the caliphs ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (see pp. 208, 218-220). At the end of the same chapter, there is a problem with the English translation of a key passage from al-Badrī's fifteenth-century *faḍāʾil* treatise on Damascus for which only a variant French translation is cited (see pp. 233-234, 245n96).[2] These issues do not, however, weaken Mulder's overall conclusion, which is that the patronage and visitation of ʿAlid shrines in medieval Damascus were popular acts among the city's overwhelmingly Sunni residents and that despite powerful Sunni voices criticizing such acts in the written record there were others (such as al-Badrī in the passage referred to above) who supported and defended them.

One of the strengths of the chapters on Damascus is Mulder's innovative engagement with twentieth-century history and today's lived experience of these sites. Few scholars of early and medieval Islamic history venture beyond the bounds of their periods, and Mulder not only does so, but does so in such a compelling way that the reader feels that he or she is trailing a pilgrim through the city of Damascus, encountering shrines and their surroundings as they occur in space. Her ability to evoke this literary tour is testimony to the breadth and depth of her fieldwork, as are the photographs that are beautifully reproduced throughout the book. Moreover, the interviews she was able to conduct with the Damascene Shiʿi caretaker of a number of shrines, whose family has played this role for at least four generations, allows her to include

2. After consulting an Arabic edition of the text, I favor Henri Sauvaire's French translation, which Mulder cites, over Mulder's own. See ʿAbd Allāh al-Badrī, *Nuzhat al-anām fī mahāsin al-Shām* (Beirut: Dār al-Rāʾid al-ʿArabī, 1980), 224; and Henri Sauvaire, "Description de Damas," *Journal Asiatique* 7, 3 (1896), 453. It may be that Mulder is following Josef Meri's English translation of the same anecdote as reported in Ibn al-Ḥawrānī's sixteenth-century pilgrimage guide, which Mulder reproduces as the epigraph of the book's conclusion (267). See 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), 68. I was not able to consult an Arabic edition of Ibn al-Ḥawrānī's text.

a discussion of late Ottoman patronage in Damascus. The financial support provided by the Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) for the renovation and beautification of several ʿAlid shrines in the first decade of the twentieth century can be seen as a continuation of the medieval pattern of ecumenism in which Sunni princes and patrons endowed ʿAlid shrines for the benefit of a diverse Muslim population.[3] Of course, two of the most heavily visited ʿAlid shrines in Syria – the Mashhad Sayyida Zaynab, about 7km south of Damascus, and the Mashhad Sayyida Ruqayya, near Bāb al-Farādīs within the walls of the old city – have been famously and sometimes controversially reconstructed due to political patronage in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, most recently through joint Syrian-Iranian efforts to promote the sites as destinations for international Shiʿi pilgrimage. Nonetheless, the pattern set in the medieval period continues – while international visitors tend to be Shiʿi, local Muslims of various sectarian orientations worship at these sites as their ancestors had for hundreds of years.

Sadly, this pattern is now being disrupted. Since 2012, many of the sites documented so beautifully in the book have been damaged, and sectarian violence has fragmented and traumatized the Syrian population. Of the experience of finishing her book during this period, Mulder writes: "This reality has made writing about the unifying force of Syria's landscape of ʿAlid shrines a poignant enterprise, leaving me to wonder at times whether the past I have written of here is relevant for Syria's present. And yet, that past beckons, with its evidence of coexistence even in times of contestation" (268). This past does beckon, and the final chapters of the book make clear why *Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria* is such a significant contribution. Mulder attributes the emergence of this architecture of ecumenism to another time of military and sectarian conflict – the onset of the Crusades in the late eleventh century and the nearly simultaneous transition between the era known as the "Shiʿi century" and the era known as the "Sunni revival." She argues that this was a period of intensive "emplacement" of Islamic sacred history, when "Islamic history was linked to the landscape in an ever-increasing variety of ways" (258). And in this landscape, "the shrines of the ʿAlids occupied a very particular place" (261). Unlike many other Syrian holy sites that were linked to Biblical history and therefore could be seen as reinforcing Christian claims in the region, shrines to the ʿAlids were meaningful only to Muslims. Moreover, at a time when Sunni rulers were consolidating power over territories that had recently been under Shiʿi rule while also calling for Muslim solidarity in the face of Crusader incursions, the ʿAlids were reassuringly unifying. As Mulder argues, "shrines for the family of the Prophet function as a neutral palette, from which... visitors could simultaneously paint an image of sectarian specificity or of pan-Islamic inclusivism, depending on the needs and context of those who found them relevant" (237). This made shrines to the ʿAlids the perfect material form for making manifest a uniquely Islamic sacred landscape that could be many things to

3. Mulder has usefully expanded this section of the book into an article: "Abdülhamid and the ʿAlids: Ottoman Patronage of 'Shiʿi' Shrines in the Cemetary of Bāb al-Ṣaghīr in Damascus," *Studia Islamica* 108 (2013): 16-47.

many Muslims.

Throughout the book Mulder brilliantly reads the built environment as inseparable from lived experience, even when this makes determining the origins and past uses of such living spaces difficult, to say the least. The structures Mulder analyzes in *Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria* have been renovated, reconstructed, abandoned, enlarged, beautified, and rededicated over the centuries; some structures that were originally outside of the city walls are now, thanks to urban expansion, located inside of the city walls; and some structures have literally sunk underground, taking on new life as crypts. In all of these cases, devotional practice and material culture have been mutually constitutive. In her conclusion, Mulder emphasizes how studying material culture in this way can complement, enhance, and even provide counter-narratives to a primarily text-based approach to medieval Islamic history, especially since surviving textual sources tend to communicate the perspectives of a relatively homogenous male urban elite. These sources, for instance, make medieval Damascus seem like a quintessentially Sunni city, intolerant of minority sects and suspicious of associations with Shiʿism. In *Shrines of the ʿAlids in Medieval Syria*, however, Damascus is transformed into a diverse city in which ordinary people, wealthy patrons, and bookish scholars – Sunnis and Shiʿis, men and women alike – have mingled together in ʿAlid shrines for hundreds of years. We can only hope that the ecumenism to which Mulder's study is eloquent testimony re-emerges victorious from the rubble of war; the cycle of reconstruction and transformation begins anew; and the resilient Syrian people re-claim their past and present.