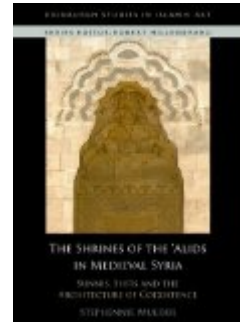**Stephennie Mulder.** *Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 320 pp. $120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-4579-4.

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In *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence*, Stephennie Mulder interweaves architectural and social history to advance a new understanding of the role of shrines in the medieval Islamic world. By identifying forty-plus shrines devoted to the 'Alids in the *bilad al-sham*, she examines the development of saint cults and sacred topography on a macroscopic level. Her analysis moves beyond cataloguing the sites, however, to reconstruct archaeological and textual evidence for each monument and to trace shifts in patronage and ritual practice. This allows her to nuance and extend prior scholarship on medieval pilgrimage and the sanctification of the Syrian landscape, which has largely focused on how these phenomena were shaped through textual discourse. In these past studies, construction provides evidence for cultural constructs, serving as material proof of its physical entrenchment. Mulder's book, however, suggests a need to rethink the practice of "reading" architecture as an encoding of specific historical narratives, advocating for an "inherent flexibility and fluidity of meaning, relevance, and identity" attested by their long-standing appeal as loci for patronage and devotion (p. 237).

The shift from textual to material culture, and from the historical moment to the *longue durée,* is not without its methodological challenges, but Mulder's work highlights the benefits of an interdisciplinary and adaptive approach. Rather than beginning with an evocative reconstruction of medieval urban landscapes, each monument's analysis departs from the perspective of the present. Many of the shrines of Damascus and its outlying neighborhoods, including the Mashhad of Sayyida Zaynab in Rawiya, Mashhad Sayyida Ruqayya in Bab al-Faradis, and four mausolea in the Bab al-Saghir cemetery frustrate any attempt to study them as emblematic of medieval architecture, as their contemporary structures are largely the product of twentieth-century patronage. The Mashhad al-Husayn and Mashhad al-Muhassin in Aleppo, however, are two of the major monuments of Ayyubid architecture and have been largely unchanged throughout eight centuries of

active use. An unknown 'Alid shrine in Balis, which forms the basis for the first chapter, is presented through the eyes of the author-as-archaeologist, outlining her efforts during the 2005-09 Princeton-Syrian Antiquities Authority excavations to reconstruct practice and rediscover 'Alid identifications at a site abandoned in 1259 CE. Regardless of the structure's modern form, Mulder begins her interpretation with the visible material at hand, noting continuities of ritual use by describing contemporary pilgrim experience before analyzing and sequencing architecture and epigraphy. Texts, particularly those of Ibn 'Asakir (d. 1176), 'Ali al-Harawi (d. 1215), Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217), Ibn Abi Tayyi' (d. 1228-33), Ibn al-'Adim (d. 1262), Abu Shama (d. 1268), and Ibn Shaddad (d. 1284), support her observations regarding chronologies of construction or, when the shrines have no medieval material to observe, are used to re-imagine their prior forms. Mulder's careful retracing of alterations to individual shrines over the course of several centuries demonstrates the mutability of structure and saint, suggesting that the shrines' unique capacity "to transform themselves to suit the needs of believers" is what makes them central to social and devotional practice (p. 232).

Running in parallel to the architectural analysis, these texts are also used to reconstruct a medieval social history for the shrines, which she argues constituted "a new type of polyvalent devotional space: space that meant multiple things to varied groups of devotees; space that served as nodes of interaction between factions often depicted in opposing terms" (p. 8). Studies by Yasser Tabbaa and other scholars have viewed the architecture of the period as a material support for the Sunni Revival, presenting the Mashhad al-Husayn and Mashhad al-Muhassin as "a challenge to the Sunni Ayyubids."[1] Mulder presents her focus on 'Alid shrines, and their characteristic polyvalence, as an explicit challenge to this historiographic current by detailing the involvement of Zangid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman rulers in major monumental projects, and noting the continued investment by Sunni patrons in the shrines' upkeep and appearance. By incorporating smaller-scale shrines in the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, her study looks beyond patronage by ruling parties to study it as a devotional and political practice accessible to multiple rungs on the social ladder. Her analysis of the Shi'i epigraphic content on the twelfth-century wooden cenotaph of Sukayna in Damascus demonstrates how an attention to multiple scales of urban patronage can reveal counternarratives erased within the dominant historical record. A legacy of architectural patronage by Sunni and Shi'i alike, and continued historical and archaeological evidence of shrine use, marked the presence of the 'Alids in medieval (and modern) urban space. According to Mulder, this patronage, and the ensuing monuments, also served as a particularly effective means of fostering common devotion among a divided *umma.* Their efficacy, for Mulder, lay in the inherent lack of clarity behind the shrines themselves and the conscious mobilization of ambiguity in service to sectarian consensus. What emerges is an unequivocal sanctity with an equivocal message—inscriptions as polemical or conciliatory, and devotional space as ideological or neutral, depending on social context and the interpretation of the viewer.

By transforming what Mulder (in keeping with historiographic practice and common understanding) occasionally refers to as "Shi'i devotional space" into an ecumenical locus of self-definition and interaction, the 'Alids become unique intercessors between sectarian factions. Although a comprehensive treatment of medieval shrines in Aleppo and Damascus lies outside the purview of Mulder's book, it is worth asking how the omission of other urban shrines from her narrative recolors her interpretation of how devotional space and saint functioned in medieval society. The selection of the 'Alids as a significant subset of saints is persuasive, but the interpretation of their shrines as uniquely polyvalent political mediators seems to undercut her assertion that they reflect

wider practices of saintly devotion and shrine visitation. Was *ziyarat* to ʿAlid monuments a distinct form of ritual for Sunnis, or was it folded into wider patterns of saintly veneration? If Sunnis were frequenting and patronizing "Shiʾi devotional space," are Shiʾis making pilgrimages to non-ʿAlid sites? If the stucco material from the shrine of al-Khidr in Balis demonstrates an ʿAlid identity for a monument to a non-ʿAlid saint, how do we define monumental and saintly typologies on a wider level? Can we see the Maqam Ibrahim in Aleppo and Magharat al-Dam and other sites on Mt. Qasiyun outside of Damascus as similarly ecumenical or mediatory space? By rethinking how sacred space is interpreted as a physical and ritual construct, Mulder points to several exciting avenues of research across the disciplines.

In the final chapter, Mulder switches focus from historical and ritual constructions of place to the emplacement of those histories and rituals within the landscape, using the network of shrines for Husayn's head as a case study for the physical inscription of Islamic narratives onto the land. Research by Paul M. Cobb on the production and authentication of Syria's sanctity in early *fada'il* texts and work by Daniella Talmon-Heller and Josef Meri on medieval saints, shrines, and pilgrimage suggest that an accretion of layers of history and types of saints, stretching from the biblical period through to living saints, was an integral part of creating a sacred landscape.[2] Mulder's contribution to this rich thread of scholarship is to advocate for the "social production of sacred space," asserting that the landscape was defined for the majority of believers by rituals, not by rhetoric (p. 248). Her project demonstrates the profitability of pairing a reconstruction of historical modes of thought regarding space with an analysis of how it was physically transformed. More broadly writ, it reflects Mulder's interweaving of monuments and movements throughout the book, and her construction of a methodology

that can mediate between archaeological ensembles and historical texts, to the benefit of both.

Notes

[1]. Yasser Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 121.

[2]. Paul M. Cobb, "Virtual Sacrality: Making Muslim Syria Sacred Before the Crusades," *Medieval Encounters* 8, no. 1 (2002): 35-55; Daniella Talmon-Heller, "Graves, Relics and Sanctuaries: The Evolution of Syrian Sacred Topography (Eleventh-Thirteenth Centuries)," *ARAM* 19 (2007): 601-620; and Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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