

the finance director). Using such evidence, she seems to suggest a time frame for the documents of roughly 107/725 to 133/750 (pp. 123–4).

The book, then, concerns the early Arab/Islamic documentary record. It should lay to rest any remaining questions as to the value of this material, if indeed such questions persist. The merits of this particular archive, previously unpublished, are twofold (p. 10): it is a coherent body of material and it permits a view of the dynamics of Arab/Islamic rule at a level that is sadly unavailable for any other early Islamic province. It is nothing short of astonishing, really, to have access of this sort. Thus, in part, the book considers a series of mundane and typical decisions by officials much lower placed than the governors and heads of fiscal bureaux about whom one is accustomed to reading. Sijpesteijn argues, on this basis, for a re-evaluation of Umayyad rule over Egypt. The classic view of an “extreme centralization under the total control of Fustat” (p. 200) sits uncomfortably with what the letters suggest of a flexible and decentralized system. It seems obvious that both Ibn As‘ad and Najid ibn Muslim enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy in running their respective offices.

But alongside the discussion of a provincial administrative history, the book provides a careful assessment of an emergent Arabic-language culture of correspondence. Sijpesteijn is careful to relate the early history of Arab/Islamic Egypt to its wider setting: “[this] new country was ... an integral part of the late antique Mediterranean and Sasanian worlds” (p. 259). But she is just as careful to underscore the contributions of the new Arab/Muslim era. Among these is the introduction of a new and increasingly standardized system of legal and fiscal letter writing that joined Arab/Egyptian society to the wider Islamic realm. Letters demanded revenue or more rigorous attention to policy, but carried as well an unmistakable underlying message regarding the presence and ambitions of the Arab/Muslim state. The letters were tokens of empire. This feature of the documents is particularly clear in Letter 8, a large format letter in which Najid ibn Muslim asks Ibn As‘ad to proceed with the levy of *sadaqa* and *zakat* taxes from the villages of his district. Sijpesteijn proceeds with an important discussion of why a district official, serving Umayyad Damascus, should have seen fit to dispatch a long and highly visible document of this sort. It had to do with the effort to stabilize the flow of revenue, institute a more efficient system of extraction and offset the loss of particular forms of payment that followed on conversion to Islam by native Egyptians.

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STEPHENIE MULDER:

The Shrines of the ‘Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi‘is and the Architecture of Coexistence.

(Edinburgh Studies in Islamic Art.) xiv, 297 pp. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. £75. ISBN 978 07486 4579 4.

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This book explores the place and meaning of ‘Alid shrines in Syrian society from approximately the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries CE (by “‘Alid”, Mulder means any shrine with a link to an ‘Alid figure, or else one that carries reverence for the ‘Alids). The author also provides documentation of these shrines up to the time she conducted fieldwork before the outbreak of the ongoing civil war. In

terms of methodology, the book is characterized by an ambitious combination of the material evidence extant today (standing buildings, archaeological remains, inscriptions, etc.) and contemporaneous textual sources. The substantial use of textual sources plays an important role in this study since not many of the shrines studied retain their medieval structures sufficiently well for us to develop substantive arguments based solely on the architectural or archaeological evidence.

In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book contains five chapters. The first four present discussions of individual shrines (an excavated *mashhad* in the vicinity of the ruins of Bālis, two shrines at Aleppo, ten at the Bāb al-Ṣaghīr cemetery in Damascus, and four others in and around the Syrian capital). Chapter 5 is devoted to theoretical considerations on the basis of the preceding empirical investigations.

The argument of the book may be summarized as follows: from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, Syria witnessed the birth of numerous 'Alid shrines. At the same time as signalling the survival of sizeable Shii communities, this phenomenon indicates that those 'Alid shrines held supra-sectarian appeal to Muslims in the region, even during the so-called "Sunni revival". In fact, many of those who patronized the shrines were Sunni. The emergence of these 'Alid shrines was an important feature of the ongoing Islamization of the sacred landscape of Syria at that time, a trend prompted in part by the Christianization effected by the Crusades. The historical narrative about the transportation of Ḥusayn's head and of his close relatives after the incident at Karbala' played a crucial role in this process. By linking diverse places to past deeds with sacred significance (and thus causing devotees to perform ritual deeds to commemorate them), this narrative contributed to the emergence of a "landscape of deeds"; an Islamic mode of sacred landscape-making to be differentiated from, say, Greek and Roman models that were "topographically grounded" (p. 253).

The detailed documentation regarding the evolution of the architecture of individual 'Alid shrines and the narratives concerning them presented in this book demonstrate how mutable shrines are both in terms of their physical structures and their devotional significations. A shrine may indeed change its identity over time, or even disappear altogether. Even when its identity remains unchanged, the meaning it holds is not necessarily the same to all people from all eras. The author should be commended for painstakingly reconstructing the intriguing histories of these numerous 'Alid shrines.

It is, to be sure, challenging to elucidate how 'Alid shrines were perceived in medieval Syria, especially given the reticence of available evidence in that regard. The physical structures of the shrines' buildings are rather featureless and any mention of such shrines in literary sources is often tantalizingly brief. One inevitably has to rely on deductive reasoning on the basis of one's knowledge from elsewhere about the situation at the time. Our understanding of the socio-religious milieu is thus paramount. One proposal I would like to make here is to consider more seriously the possibility of some kind of "confessional ambiguity" (J. Woods) or even "Twelver Sunnism" (M.-T. Danishpazhūh and R. Ja'fariyān) behind the Sunni patronage (Mulder is not entirely unaware of such syncretic trends, see p. 144). Mulder repeatedly remarks that the 'Alid shrines had supra-sectarian appeal to Muslims in general, but does not elaborate on the nature of the shrines' *specific* appeal to Sunnis. Envisaging some kind of syncretic trend might prove helpful in reinforcing her argument in this regard.

Such religious trends are, admittedly, typically associated with the Persianate world in later centuries. It is, however, interesting to note that Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256) who, the author tells us, regularly held preaching sessions at the

Mashhad ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn in Damascus’s Umayyad Mosque (p. 215), was also the author of the *Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ*, a book on the merits of ‘Alī and the ‘Alids. Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī not only devotes many pages to Ḥusayn (the narrative of the transportation of his head is also there) but discusses all twelve imams in his book. It would be interesting to see how the consideration of this kind of “confessional ambiguity” among Syrian Sunnis might add nuance to the author’s interpretations, especially to that concerning the inscriptions on the portal of the Ayyubid Sultan al-Zāhir erected at the Mashhad al-Ḥusayn at Aleppo (chapter 2). The combination of the twelve imams and the first four caliphs as the desired recipients of God’s blessing in the inscriptions may indeed mirror, as the author argues, al-Zāhir’s attempt to bring about “conciliation and coexistence” (p. 97) between his Sunni and Shii subjects. Even in that case, would it not be interesting to suppose that it also mirrored al-Zāhir’s sincere belief in the holy status of all those who were mentioned?

Some readers may be distracted by the inaccurate handling of certain names and concepts concerning the Prophet’s family, Shiism, and early Islamic history in more general terms. For example, *al-‘itra al-ṭāhira* is a common term used to denote the Prophet’s family (p. 61, n. 33); “People of (‘ubayy?)” (p. 156) should most probably be “People of the Mantle (‘abā [for ‘abā’])”; ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz must always be differentiated from each other (pp. 208, 219–220). Some readers might desire further clarification before accepting some of Mulder’s arguments: for example, how can you eliminate the possibility that the name Muḥammad interpreted to denote the twelfth imam (p. 36) is not in fact being used to denote the ninth imam? The author, however, should be thanked for sharing the fruits of such a challenging project, one that only those scholars with the necessary versatility, perseverance and passion can carry through to the end. *The Shrines of the ‘Alids in Medieval Syria* forces us to recognize the historical value of the ‘Alid shrines in Syria at this moment in time when such recognition is needed more urgently than ever before.

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DENIS GENEQUAND:

Les établissements des élites omeyyades en Palmyrène et au Proche-Orient.

(Bibliothèque archéologique et historique.) xviii, 462 pp. Beirut: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2012. €100. ISBN 978 2 35159 380 6.
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The majority of the “desert castles” of Greater Syria were built when the region was the centre of the Muslim Empire ruled by the Umayyad dynasty (661–750 CE). While most were constructed *ex nihilo*, some developed existing late Roman constructions; a small number have also sometimes been dated to the early Abbasid period (after 750 CE). Some can be identified with specific patrons, and these have been the focus of particular scholarly attention. Others are impressive architecturally or decoratively and so have been discussed extensively for these reasons. However, the majority have left fewer traces and are the subject of concomitantly fewer analyses. All present significant challenges of classification and interpretation. Indeed, the extent to which these buildings constitute a distinct group at all remains