Sacred Place and Sacred Time in the Medieval Islamic Middle East: A Historical Perspective, by Daniella Talmon-Heller. Edinburgh Studies in Classical Islamic History and Culture, Edinburgh University Press, 2020. 279pp., 28 illustrations, 1 additional map, index. Hb. £80. ISBN-13: 9781474460965.

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In Fred Donner's typology (1998), historians who generally follow the "tradition-critical approach" in the history of Islam are interested less in "truths" as in the ways contemporary people perceived their realities. This approach stands almost in complete contrast to the research questions that archaeologists often post. In essence, we try to figure "what really happened" in the *strata*, structure, site, region, or any other context. In a way, we also expect the texts to provide information to that end.

The book discusses sanctity in Islam from two perspectives that also divide the book, of space and time. The first part deals with activities associated with a specific relic, the head of al-Ḥusayn. It presents the possible chronological sequence of events regarding the keeping and worship of the head, inquires the reasons for constructing one of the shrines in 'Asqalān in Palestine, and introduces diversified approaches to the authenticity of the head and opinions about the pilgrimage. The second part is devoted to rituals and festivities during month Rajab: in pre-Islamic times in Arabia, in the Fatimid period, and along the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. This chronological emphasis represents significant changes in the leading Muslim doctrine, from Shī'i Ismā'īli (the Fatimids) to Sunni (the Ayyubids).

As Talmon-Heller declares at the beginning of the book (p. 6), the study shifts between the micro and the macro viewpoints. It utilizes texts by scholars and travellers from different periods, and supports the reports with material, securely-dated evidence such as inscriptions and wooden objects. On the one hand, the abundant examples highlight the case studies, and on the other hand, a wider context is provided for the landscape, the period, the regimes, the religious doctrines, and the contemporary ideologies. The author rarely judges the ancient authors and their reports or marks them as 'truthful' or reliable. The data is then compared to typologies and models by religion scholars, furnishing once more a wider theoretical setting. Whereas no stone is left unturned, which is a clear advantage, this abundance can be confusing at times.

The first case study focuses on the shrines for al-Ḥusayn's head. Al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī Abi Ṭālib was the grandson of the Prophet. According to the sources, he was killed in the renowned battle of Karbala (61 H/680 CE). The narratives describe how his head was kept (p. 29) and found its way to 'Asqalān in southern Palestine (pp. 65–66). In the late 11th century, the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamālī (d. 1121) built a shrine in Ascalon for this relic, along with many other construction projects. An inscription on a wooden *minbar* which was found in Hebron is associated with this construction. The site might be explained as part of a local memory of a shrine to Christian martyrs from the 4th century which is documented as late as the 6th century (pp. 61–65).

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Following the Crusader conquest of the settlement in 1153, the head was moved to Cairo (pp. 74–79). However, pilgrimage has also continued to the Ascaloni shrine and the structure was even reconstructed in 1887 (pp. 101–109).

The study—in both its parts—illuminates a great number of topics. It stresses the relations between the authorities and religion (in particular, shrines, rituals and festivities), the struggle between top/bottom ideologies or ‘popular’ discourses vs. scholars (the *‘ulamā’*), the links between Muslim and pre-Islamic worship, the correspondence of a structure with its audience, and the varied meanings a space receives (or creates). Conclusions I found particularly interesting are the disconnection of Rajab from most of its pre-Islamic associations through the transition into the lunar calendar (p. 221), and the visitation of the *‘Asqalāni* shrine after the removal of the relic (p. 37), possibly due to designated strategies (p. 91).

Nonetheless, the connection with the physical sphere in the book should be re-evaluated. First, one might add a discussion about the relations between the toponym *‘Asqalān* and the site Ascalon (i.e. are they always one place?) or the possible identifications of the original shrine. Moreover, the purpose of the figures is not always clear (e.g. reconstruction maps of Cairo in different periods) and in some cases their presence might be misleading. For example, a Fatimid glass vessel which is often interpreted (and titled) as a mosque lamp is presented in order to illustrate literary descriptions about mosques lighting, but the line between these two sorts of evidence cannot be drawn at face value.

The book is valuable to Islamic archaeologists on several levels. The straightforward aspect is knowledge: it sheds light on domains where archaeology has a shorter reach, most relevantly, the practises which took place inside and in relation to the physical space. Second, the book shakes our static floor of periodization, which is usually established around time frames of 200 years or more. Texts, as this study demonstrates, present a dynamic history of events, discourses, and multi-layered meanings. Finally, it introduces a different approach to events and reality. This might inspire us to question our written sources, and perhaps to utilize them not any more for ‘truths’, but for the emic perspective they provide and which our method lacks.

Reference

Donner, F. M.

1998 *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing*. Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press.