Book Review:

Hammaming in the Sham: A Journey through the Turkish Baths of Damascus, Aleppo and Beyond


Boggs has produced a richly photographed and entertaining study of “a passing way of life” (42) accessible to a general audience. With glossy color photographs on nearly every page and dimensions of 11.3 x 8.4 x 0.7 inches, Garnet presents this as a coffee-table book, a description Boggs uses for Malu Halasa's and Rana Salam's *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie: Intimacy and Design*. (104) The images complement observations on architecture, brief accounts of ancient, medieval, and modern history, and humorous - sometimes irreverent - remarks of “the foreigner in their midst” (175), an Irishman with plenty of travel experience in the Middle East.

He alternates between participant observation and personal musings, framing his first-person account of visits to bath-houses with references to poetry, scholarly studies, travelogues, and novels. His goal is to “[record] the way of life of the last remaining hammams in Syria, and the traditions that somehow survive beneath their domes – before they, apart from a few showpiece hammams set aside for tourism perhaps, go the way of those who built them.” (59) This sense of nostalgia for declining hammam spaces is an overall theme of the book; he notes that most middle-class Syrians no longer visit, so that the demographic is only the very wealthy or the *derawish*, for these purposes the poor who lack bathrooms at home. And yet he writes that “you meet all types” in the hammam, stating “I have rarely found myself mixing with a wider range of people in one room than in a Syrian hammam.” (92)

Boggs travels for the pleasure of the experience and the love of the journey, with a passion for the cities of Aleppo and Damascus as well as a curiosity for the ruins of hammams in Aphamea, Serjilla, and Bosra. His project even takes him beyond Syria’s borders to other parts of historic Bilad al-Sham, as with the Umayyad retreat of Qasr al Umra in modern-day Jordan and Beit al Deen, referring one assumes to the palace built in the late 18th and early 19th century in the Druze mountains southeast of Beirut. He calls Beit al Deen “the most wonderful private hammam in all of Bilad al-Sham,” (58) constructed as he notes by Italian architects who added extensive courtyards, ornate ceilings, and *mashrabiyyat.*
The book begins with a short glossary and introduction followed by four chapters: “Hammaming in Bilad al-Sham”, “Cathedrals of the Flesh” (a nod to Alexia Brue's 2003 Cathedrals of the Flesh: My Search for the Perfect Bath), “Aleppo and Beyond”, and “Revival.” A half-page epilogue precedes yet another full-page color image, this one of light entering small domes over Hammam Milek al Zaher. A three-page index rounds out the study. Indeed, this reviewer believes the greatest appeal to this book, notwithstanding the sometimes refreshingly informal, sometimes uncomfortably direct writing style, is the presentation of about one hundred and seventy detailed photographs that accompany his narrative. There is the glimpse at the breathtaking and painstakingly restored mosaic in Beit al Mal (112), of the carpenters at work in what used to be Hammam al-Sultan (53), of the intricate pattern carved into the doorframe at Hammam al-Zain in Damascus (67), and so on.

Boggs refers to a variety of sources, from 19th and early 20th century travelogues and ethnographies (Edward Lane, Gertrude Bell, J. Sauvaget, and Michel Ecochard and Claude Le Coeur are all here) to recently published guidebooks, as with Abdalla Hadjar's 2006 (2nd ed) Historical Monuments of Aleppo and Ross Burns' 1994 Monuments of Syria: An Historical Guide. He mentions Al-Ahram online posts and scholarly studies on gender and architectural history. Deniz Kandiyoti's “The Paradoxes of Masculinity: Some Thoughts on Segregated Societies” in Cornwall's and Lindisfarne's 1994 edited volume Dislocating Masculinity, and Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh's 2004 The Image of an Ottoman City: Imperial Architecture and Urban Experience in Aleppo in the 16th and 17th centuries are among the academic literature from which he draws the occasional bit of trivia. Even novels (Moris Farhi's 2004 Young Turk) make an appearance. Clearly, for a coffee-table book, Boggs has done considerable research.

This reviewer also sees a few drawbacks. True, Boggs is aware of Orientalist work, particularly with descriptions of hammams, and he is careful to point to scholarship (even Edward Said) in the text. But the images seem to tell a different story – the full-page, full-color photographs of half-naked young men “wearing just a futa [a light towel], or perhaps less” suggest an eroticizing quality not unlike the very Orientalist works Boggs is careful enough to critique. If he is using these images to make an argument about the role of the European gaze and the presentation of the “Eastern” subject to “Western” audiences, it is not clearly developed here. He also frequently relies on an intermediary (a first lieutenant, a hammam employee, a nearby person) to transcend what is presumably both a cultural and a linguistic barrier, one he alludes to here: “...I couldn't quite catch his drift, for his Arabic was too classical for me, and I had to distance myself from the garlic of his breath, and I preferred the attendant's gentle explanation of things.” (44) He comes to identify people who can bridge the divides that he frequently reminds his readers are there, drawing parallels to architecture, behaviors, even weather that his Western European readers might find more familiar. For example, he writes that “in contrast to the often insipid light of an Irish winter, in Damascus there is the sharp intensity of desert light...” (103) and “the young Al-Salih took ill, 'I Claudius' style” (44) and even, “In Aleppo the hammam is not just a bathing place; it also functions as a restaurant – a little incongruous to the visitor perhaps, for who in Ireland would bring in their supper to eat on the tiled floor of the city baths?” (122) These repeated tie-ins to culture outside the Middle East may be meant to draw in Irish readers (or readers familiar with Irish culture), but it has the perhaps unintended consequence of constantly pointing to an otherness the reader is not allowed to forget.

Furthermore, the manner in which Boggs reflects on his experiences leaves this reader uneasy with some of the conclusions he draws. For example, he writes that “with Palestinians and Kurds and people from the coast it was somehow different – these were people I felt I got to know. But it seemed to me that the Damascenes keep you in the public, external room with that traditional politeness of theirs,” and that “after some years in the city I would say that unlike other Syrians, Damascenes never quite let
you through to the inner rooms – to what is personal or even intimate – but keep you out there in the public courtyard.” (78) Such generalization across a city's population (or, even less appropriately, across an ethnic group) seems unfair if not subjective. Were a foreigner to arrive in a country without fluency in the local language, but with a full itinerary of visits to more than sixty hammams in three countries for a book project, it would be exceedingly difficult to feel included enough in the lives of local people to draw a conclusion about their openness as a whole. Given such research conditions, it is only expected that one fall short of gaining entrance to the intimate sides of others' lives.

These critiques aside, *Hammaming in the Sham* provides a great deal of material for readers interested in casually dipping into a range of themes connected to hammam experiences. Boggs has an anecdote or comment (even if only in passing) on topics as varied as Roman baths, Ottoman sultans, jinn, mystics and saints, cupping to cleanse bad blood, and the “eviction from paradise” of growing boys no longer innocent in the women's hammam. There is no bibliography, and the page or two of notes after each chapter are an opportunity to dig more deeply into sources without distracting the less involved reader from the body of the text. And again, many of the images do provide fabulously rich glimpses into the built environment.

The most interesting argument this reviewer draws from *Hammaming in the Sham* is succinctly put in Boggs' suggestion that “perhaps the hammam nowadays does not so much preserve an Oriental world for Westerners...as create one for Arabs themselves” (103.) With this statement, he reminds this reader of the nostalgia and marketing that form what Christa Salamandra sees as part preservation movement, part commodification of the folkloric in her 2004 study *A New Old Damascus: Authenticity and Distinction in Urban Syria*. Her study curiously gets no mention by Boggs, but perhaps this is because he has written this to be more of an engaging travel diary for a popular audience than an intervention in scholarly debates. For his goal, Boggs has done a great job.

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