SSA Book and Article Prizes 2015

The Prize Committee of the Syrian Studies Association is pleased to announce the prizes of the most outstanding book and article for 2015. The committee considered books published between 1 July 2013 and 30 Jun 2015 and articles or book chapters published between 1 July 2014 and 30 June 2015. The committee was made up of Charles Wilkins (chair), Antoin Borrut, Laura Ruiz de Elvira Carrascal, Elyse Semerdjian, Malissa Taylor, and Tina Zintl.

We had eleven books and seven articles to evaluate, ranging in discipline from archaeology, history and art history to political science, anthropology and literary, theatre, and gender studies. The subjects covered included, in the medieval period, Umayyad and Ayyubid monumental architecture; in the Ottoman period, popular religion, the urban representations of nomads, the history of the Jewish community and rabbinate, the administration of Syria during the First World, and the rise of Western humanitarianism in that conflict; and in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the gentrification of Old Damascus, theatre as a site of political dissent, feminism in the academic establishment, and the practice of Islamic law in the ongoing Syrian Civil War.

The committee commends the winners and expresses its appreciation to the participants for contributing to this closely fought competition.

Book Prize

The committee named two co-winners of the 2015 book prize:


This book is a bold and provocative study that explores and re-evaluates the phenomenon of popular religion in Greater Syria from the 17th to the 19th centuries. The author argues that the mass of the population, both urban and rural, engaged in forms of everyday worship that were shaped decisively not by their respective confessional religious identities, but rather by a single, vast social ethos that transcended the conventional religious establishments. Working as a historical ethnographer and using an impressive range of sources, Grehan describes a massive sphere of popular culture characterized by the use of propitiatory magic, reverence for miracle-workers and for nature cults and spirit cults, and various forms of ancestor veneration. While Grehan’s study focuses on Ottoman Syria and Palestine from the late 17th century to the early 20th century, his analysis is rich with comparisons to other societies and cultures; and his conclusions will challenge scholars working on other parts of the Middle East and elsewhere across Afro-Eurasia, from late antiquity into modernity.


In this highly original book, Stephennie Mulder offers a fresh look at medieval shrines and reveal how Alid monuments can unveil an architecture of coexistence that challenges long-established views of sectarian divisions. Looking particularly at Balis, Aleppo, and Damascus’ many shrines, Mulder offers the first systematic analysis of the construction of an ecumenical religious landscape in medieval Syria. She successfully demonstrates that Shiite architecture surprisingly flourished during the “Sunni revival” (11th-13th centuries), largely under the patronage of Sunni benefactors. Mulder notably shows how, in the aftermath of the Karbala drama, the itinerary of Husayn’s head (real or imagined) created an Alid topography that became meaningful for Sunnis as well. Along the way, she also demonstrates how the
built environment needs to be understood in terms of lived experiences and ritual practices. The book is a major contribution at the intersection of art history, archaeology, and socio-cultural history, with insights that will interest specialists in anthropology, archeological ritual, and landscape studies.

**Article Prize**


In this book chapter, Trombetta provides a much needed analysis of the shifting power structures during the rule of Hafiz al-Asad and his son Bashar al-Asad. The author casts new light not only on the functioning of Syria’s authoritarian system but also on the catalysts of the Syrian uprising. The analysis hinges on two conceptual distinctions -- between formal and informal power, and between exposed and hidden power. Trombetta argues that the authoritarian system was destabilized by a rupture in the delicate and complex balance between these multiple forms of power. The author finely combines empirical research with secondary sources to elaborate an original theoretical framework, the relevance of which will be significant both to the literature on authoritarianism and power in general and to that on the political systems in the MENA region and in Syria in particular.

*Charles Wilkins is Associate Professor of Middle Eastern History at Wake Forest University.*