
Reviewed by James A. Reilly

This handsomely produced book from historian and dean Toru Miura (Ochanomizu University, Japan) uses a model of urban social networks to explore Mamluk and Ottoman Damascus, focusing on the suburb of Salihiyya. The social networks model is derived from Ira Lapidus, who argued that intertwined, often informal social networks of military, religious and economic actors characterized Syrian cities in the Mamluk era. Lapidus’s intervention was part of a discussion about what constituted an Islamic City in the medieval Middle East. The Islamic City debate oscillated between reification (based on an idealist rendition of “Islamic urbanism” that drew on Orientalist epistemology) and grass-roots social history. In the latter approach, as Lapidus argued, historical actors came from various social strata and were preoccupied with this-worldly struggles for power, resources and influence independent of any notion of an abstracted Islam.

Miura’s take on the social networks model as a tool for understanding historical Damascus is revealed in the book’s title. Covering a span of 800 years, he argues that social networks were a foundation of Syrian urbanism, and they were dynamic: the character and composition of the networks changed over the centuries with the passage of time, characterized by changing rulers (Mamluks to Ottomans) and consecutive eras (culminating in the Ottoman Tanzimat). Considerations of prestige, property and power lay behind the actions of individuals and groups who feature in Miura’s presentation.

The book’s focus is the Damascene suburb of Salihiyya. It was founded in the early 13th century by Muslims who were fleeing the Crusaders in Palestine. They established it in the foothills of Mount Qasiyun, already known as a place of local pilgrimage, that overlooked the city. Over time Salihiyya became home to an array of Muslim religious institutions — mosques and madrasas — that added to its pious reputation. The abundance of mosques and madrasas, and the existence of waqfs needed to support them, generated documents and records that allow Miura to offer a detailed description of the quarter in the Mamluk period. In the early Ottoman period there is a gap in the Salihiyya-centric documentation, so the book’s detailed exposition of the quarter, its buildings and its networks resumes with the 18th-century era of a’yan and the subsequent Ottoman Tanzimat. Complementing the fine-grained Salihiyya documentation, Miura’s discussion of the late Mamluk to early Ottoman periods focuses on wider trends in Damascus as a whole, allowing readers to suppose that variations of these general trends were also playing out in that neighborhood. Although Salihiyya was separated from the built-up contiguous areas of central Damascus, it and its gardens were close enough to be a part of the larger urban area in medieval and early modern times.

Miura relies on waqf documents for details of Salihiyya in the Mamluk period, and on Sharia court records for the Ottoman period, so his account is colored by these sources and their preoccupations. They create inescapable biases for historians who by definition seek to anchor their studies in empirical evidence. In the earlier Mamluk period, Salihiyya appears to be mainly defined by mosques and madrasas, so the ‘ulama play a disproportionate role in discussions of the quarter’s people. For the subsequent Ottoman period, Miura’s discussion often detours into the multitudinous pathways of sijill-ology, asking what exactly the sharia court records mean, how we should read them and understand their terminology, etc. Sijill-ology is an occupational hazard (or a rewarding adventure) common to all who work with Sharia court records, but the book’s forays into these byways might cause the reader to lose the thread of the argument regarding the historical dynamism of Salihiyya’s social networks.
On the other hand, the author’s deep dive into his sources — a project that took many years and demanded exacting attention to detail — allows parts of the book to be almost a reference manual for historical Salihiyya, its institutions and prominent personalities. Miura’s account brings Salihiyya into the wider conversation about Ottoman-Arab urbanism. It reinforces an insight that (to my knowledge) was first articulated by the late historian Antoine Abdel Nour, namely that analyses of Ottoman-Syrian cities must include both their built up central districts as well as the green belts and adjoining secondary settlements (“villages”) that display urban characteristics of their own (mosques, madrasas, hammams and so forth). Salihiyya, northwest of Damascus and its erstwhile countryside suburb Ghouta, is a premier example of this phenomenon.

Syria scholars owe thanks to Toru Miura for making historical Salihiyya accessible to us in such rich detail. His publisher, Brill, has lavishly illustrated it with maps, diagrams and illustrations including the author’s own color photos of notable places.

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