



***Bones of Contention: Muslim Shrines in Palestine***, by Andrew Petersen. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 188 pages. \$69.99 cloth, \$69.99 paper, \$54.99 e-book.

#### REVIEWED BY AWAD HALABI

Andrew Petersen, professor of Islamic archaeology at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, has conducted extensive research on the topic of Islamic architecture in Palestine and the larger eastern Mediterranean region. In this current study, he explores the place of Muslim shrines in Palestine's history and landscape. He largely concentrates on providing an architectural survey of shrines with brief forays into understanding their relevance to contemporary political issues. Petersen, though, is most skilled at exploring how shrines originated and tracking their architectural development over the centuries. Based largely on the author's previous

works and existing scholarship, *Bones of Contention* is a concise and useful introduction to a topic that stretches from the pre-Islamic period to the present and catalogs a diverse range of religious structures.

As the author explains, even though the major Islamic shrines in Jerusalem and Hebron receive a great deal of attention, many others are understudied. These range from large complexes, endowed by wealthy donors, which could accommodate hundreds of visitors to humble edifices that may or may not include a tomb. Although Muslim scholars have cautioned against the ritual visitation of tombs, shrines proliferated after Muslim armies expelled the Crusaders in the twelfth century. This trend coincided with the spread of Sufism, as leaders of mystical orders established their tombs in lodges they had founded; over time their pupils and the larger public came to venerate these tombs.

In chapter 2, Petersen draws on translated texts of prominent Muslim travelers and scholars (al-Nabulsi and al-Harawi, for example) to explore Muslim writing on the topic; this is, however, a limited representation of a much wider body of literature. He then outlines how European travelers to Palestine were initially interested in Muslim shrines only for what they revealed about their biblical origins or ancient practices. Only in the early twentieth century did scholars (for instance, Tawfik Canaan and Paul Kahle) begin to take interest in the rituals worshippers conducted at shrines.

The true strength of this book is in part 2 where the author discusses the development of shrines over centuries. He examines shrines various Muslim rulers sponsored and documents closely the

building projects of the Mamluk sultan Baybars (died 1277), who emerged as the “architect of post-Crusader Palestine” (p. 50). Baybars’s patronage of Nabi Musa near Jericho, Sayyidna Ali at Arsuf, and Abu Hurayra at Yubna provided him legitimacy as the ideal Muslim ruler and enhanced the sacred nature of Palestine as a distinctly Muslim holy land in the post-Crusader landscape. Petersen also explores how major Sufi brotherhoods disseminated the practice of the veneration of tombs throughout Palestine. He highlights how Muhammad Abu al-‘Awn (died 1504), a Qadariyya order disciple, represented the important link between Sufism and the network of religious buildings that began to expand throughout the country. Chapter 6 examines the most ubiquitous type of shrine—the shaykh’s tomb—either of Sufi leaders, the founders of settlements (a practice prominent among Bedouin communities), or of local holy men. Many only have a local importance, unknown to people in other regions. Their architectural consistency—designed with a square domed (*qubba*) chamber over a tomb—rendered them synonymous with the term *maqam*. Many, though, lack a built-up structure and may not contain a tomb; rather, they are closely associated with natural features (trees, springs, caves, and so on) and are also predominantly located on hilltops (pp. 88–90). The author could have explored the etymology of *maqam*, which as Ernst Herzfeld notes in “Damascus: Studies in Architecture: I,” originally meant an oratory or a place of prayer that does not include a tomb but commemorates where a holy person has stopped or passed.<sup>‡</sup> An interesting observation Petersen makes in the subsequent chapter is that the major Shi’ite, Druze, and Bahai shrines in Palestine exhibit few differences in their architectural design from Sunni ones, unlike the practice found in other Muslim countries.

The third part of this book provides an informed sketch of the fate of Muslim shrines after 1948, such as their intentional destruction by Israel and their neglect due to villagers being expelled, as well as a general decline in the practice of shrine visits. Although the religious significance of shrines has diminished, the competition among Palestinians and Israelis to control the physical landscape and the narrative about the land has amplified their symbolic importance. This situation has led Jewish groups to appropriate Muslim shrines and convert them into exclusive Jewish places of worship, belying their inclusive past. The chapter (9) examining attempts at conserving and recording these remaining structures is informative, but the author’s discussion (which appears in the conclusion) of how shrines relate to contemporary Palestinian nationalism is brief and neglects a range of scholarly literature to make a meaningful contribution to this topic. He also incorrectly states that the British banned the Nabi Musa festival (pp. 135, 151).

*Bones of Contention* is designed to appeal to a wide audience. It includes sketches of major shrines and photos of extant ones. It is a valuable contribution that will be of interest to students and scholars of Palestine’s Islamic culture and architecture.

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<sup>‡</sup> *Ars Islamica* 9 (1942): 1–53.