

# Is Jerusalem an Ordinary City?

*Ordinary Jerusalem 1840–1940: Opening New Archives, Revisiting a Global City.* Edited by Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire. Leiden: Brill, 2018. xxiv + 594 pages. \$225.00 cloth, e-book open access.

Review by Helga Baumgarten

The work presented by Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire and the thirty-five scholar contributors in *Ordinary Jerusalem* is fascinating and a pleasure to read. The result of a research project, funded by the European Research Council under the title “Opening Jerusalem Archives: For a Connected History of ‘Citadinité’ in the Holy City, 1840–1940,” and directed by Vincent Lemire, no one interested in Jerusalem will, in the future, be able to do without this impressive book.

The three major contributions of the book are contained in the title of this project. First, the authors look at Jerusalem through the perspective of *citadinité* (urban citizenry) with a focus on interconnectedness, instead of fragmentation. Secondly, they base their work on material from new archives, used in many instances for the first time. Last, but not least, they attempt to present a history from below, focusing on the lives of ordinary people, rather than the lives of the political and economic elite, as well as a history from within, and not a history of Jerusalem through the lens of European political and economic (and religious) interests.

The book is divided into four parts: “Opening the Archives, Revealing the City,” introduced by Gudrun Kraemer (Free University of Berlin); “Imperial Allegiances and Local Authorities,” introduced by Beshara Doumani (Brown University); “Cultural Networks, Public Knowledge,” introduced by Edhem Eldem (Bogazici University); and “Sharing the City: Contacts, Claims and Conflicts,” introduced by Gadi Algazi (Tel Aviv University).

Most of the articles are written by young scholars, who were able to access

the archives relevant for this history of ordinary Jerusalem, be it in terms of language (Greek, Russian, French, English, Armenian, Ottoman Turkish, Hebrew, and, of course, Arabic) or the physical location of the archives. Obviously, only a huge collaborative effort could produce such an ambitious work.

The book covers a period of one hundred years, with 1840 as the editors' starting point. In their introduction, the editors present a "new timeline" which focuses on historical continuities instead of the usual turning points such as 1917 when Ottoman rule ended and the British Mandate or, more precisely, British colonial rule over Palestine began. The editors stress that this method is "in itself a historiographical novelty" (2).

For Dalachanis and Lemire, the period is delineated by the "arrival of the first European consulates in the 1840s . . . and the rise of intercommunity conflict in the late 1930s." Based on this reading of history, the period 1840 to 1940 "becomes a seamless historical sequence." They argue that this very period "saw the birth, maturity and ruin of a certain model of *citadinité*, understood here as the way in which city dwellers share urban space, in varying degrees of harmony and conflict" (2).

Continuity can be observed, they further argue, not least on the level of institutional structures, like "municipalities, the patriarchates (Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Latin), the Muslim awqaf, the Sephardic kotels, the Islamic courts and the Franciscan Custody" (3). By putting this "institutional resilience" at the center of their analysis, the usual "key years" in the history of Jerusalem, not only 1917, but also 1947 and 1967 (although both dates are outside the period covered in the book!), become in their view "partly meaningless" (3).

One might expect that many readers and subsequent analyses will argue with this reading of Jerusalem's history. It would seem to neglect an additional, very crucial marker of the history not only of Jerusalem, but of Palestine as a whole, that is, the beginning of Zionist immigration into Palestine with the First Aliyah in 1882. Alexander Scholch, for his part, chose the period 1856 to 1882 as the focus of his unsurpassed study "Palestine in Transformation," with the intention to put Palestine first. Obviously, this was and is also the intention of the editors and contributors to this volume, to put Jerusalem in the center of the study, not the geopolitical approach which in the past has dominated far too many studies.

Another aspect of the reading of the history of Jerusalem that will surely be taken up by subsequent research is intercommunal life and conflict in the city. It would seem to be quite problematic to discuss and analyze the historical (and ongoing) struggle between the Zionist movement and the indigenous people as simply one example of "intercommunity conflict" (2).

The approach of the book and the intention of both editors and individual contributors results in a new narrative which is based on "privileging connection over fragmentation" and therefore tries to "create links between the city's usually fragmented historical narratives" (6).

The "look for *citadinité*" (6) is another central aspect of the new narrative developed in the book. The editors and most of the authors search for "identity-forming ties which . . . link residents to their city, its history, patrimony, monuments, landscapes

and eminent historical figures” (7). They argue that this very notion of *citadinité* is “crucial to the study of mixed, imperial and divided cities” (7), especially when the fundamental question to be asked is: “In the face of religious barriers and projections of national identities, how do residents [why do the editors not use the term citizens in this context?] proceed to ‘make a city’ anyway?” (7).

Again, many readers and analyses will argue with this approach and with these new intriguing narratives. And it is hoped that the result will be further discussions and new arguments. We can only wholeheartedly agree with Gadi Algazi, when he concludes in his introduction to part four of the book (“Sharing the City: Contacts, Claims and Conflicts”) that “Jerusalem is a difficult place to think with/in” (402). The questions he puts forward in his small but extremely helpful and relevant introduction (401–2) are a program for myriad new studies: Can *citadinité* be used as a “common frame of reference”? Are we dealing with the same actors? “What methodologies are available?” Which archival collection is relevant and is the use of one single collection enough for a study of the city and the connections between its inhabitants/residents/citizens?

Before moving on to individual contributions in the book, the main questions the book raises, on which the editors base their programmatic summary, need to be put into focus.

Dalachanis and Lemire start their introduction with the simple, but extremely challenging question, namely: “Is Jerusalem an ordinary city?” Their answer is clear: “Jerusalem is an extraordinary city that can be understood only with the greatest possible use of the most ordinary tools of social, political and cultural historical research” (1).

The second question asked refers to the approach, “local or global” (1). Again, their answer is unequivocal: “Jerusalem’s local history can only be reconstructed by reference to archives often located in faraway places” (1).

The programmatic summary the editors arrive at is equally clear cut: “In transforming this double contradiction [that is, ordinary versus extraordinary and local versus global] into a creative analytical tension . . . [we] . . . revisit the ordinary history of a ‘global city’ from 1840 to 1940 . . .” (1).

In his article “Arab-Zionist Conversations in the Late Ottoman Jerusalem: Sa’id al-Husayni, Ruhi al-Khalidi and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda” (305–29), Jonathan Marc Gribetz (Princeton University) tries to give examples (sometimes successful, sometimes rather problematic) of urban interconnectedness and possibly even *citadinité* when presenting in great detail and with a deep analysis the “conversations” between two leading Jerusalem notables and a Zionist immigrant, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. At the time of the interviews, 1909, Ben-Yehuda was still very much focused on getting a positive response from the Muslim elite in Jerusalem to the immigration of Jews to Palestine and their settlement there. He published the conversations in the Zionist Hebrew language newspaper *Ha-Tsevi*, which he founded and edited.

Interestingly enough, Ben-Yehuda is focusing on the work of the newly elected parliament after the Young Turk Revolution. Al-Husayni proudly tells him that a budget was approved and that parliament “instituted many good laws in all areas of internal governance” (316). At the same time, he cautions Ben-Yehuda about too

many expectations after such a short time of parliamentary activity. Al-Khalidi makes the same point in his conversation with Ben-Yehuda, namely that after one year of parliamentary work one could not expect too much and that reforms would take time both to pass in parliament and later on to implement in political life.

Al-Husayni and al-Khalidi both agree with the assessment of Ben-Yehuda that after the revolution they were now all living in a free country in which many groups and nations could freely coexist. Already a year earlier, directly after the revolution, Ben-Yehuda had made another interview with al-Khalidi in which al-Khalidi presented himself as a political liberal. His understanding of Islam was in the same vein: “Despotism is not Islamic . . . . On the contrary, the law of Islam leans towards liberalism” (320). The conversation with the two notables, who represented Jerusalem in parliament in Istanbul, turned difficult when Ben-Yehuda started to ask his interview-partners about the Jews, their relation with the Arabs, and, in particular, when he directly brought up the question of Jewish (Zionist) immigration to Palestine.

Al-Khalidi was quite clear and even blunt when giving his assessment. While openly accepting the individual immigration of Jews to Palestine – “for individual Jews, the gates of the land must certainly be open, without interference” (323), he objected to mass-immigration and to the establishment of Jewish colonies. In particular, he pointed out that the financial ability of Jewish immigrants to buy land would lead to disaster for the indigenous Arab population: “The Jews . . . are able to buy much land and evict the Arabs from their land and the inheritance of their ancestors” (324). Gribetz rightly stresses that al-Khalidi saw and understood the danger for Arabs through economic changes, through the buying of land which in turn would serve as the basis for the eviction of Arabs and (in the end, obviously not foreseen by al-Khalidi at the time) for the establishment of a new state without Arabs and not for Arabs.

Interestingly, al-Khalidi is very harsh in his criticism of Ashkenazi Jews. While he stresses the “brotherhood and closeness between Jews and Arabs” as something “most natural and most desired,” he does not see any readiness on the part of Ashkenazi Jews, and one might be more precise here, Zionist immigrants from Europe, “to come closer to us” (323). They are “an entirely different world and they do not come in contact with us” (323). Gribetz points out that, in the opinion of al-Khalidi, “Ashkenazi Jews were keeping the communities apart and squandering the possibilities of Jewish integration and acculturation among the Arabs” (323).

In a nutshell, we do encounter here the problems of interconnectedness, integration, and *citadinité*, in particular between indigenous Jerusalemites and Zionist immigrants, that is, the newcomers. Gribetz stresses the importance of the simple “possibility of ‘speaking together’,” of learning about the neighbor and revising one’s perspective, and is very positive about the “potential in *citadinité*” (328), as witnessed in the conversations he analyzes in his article. Still, he is quite aware of the limits of this potential when he points out that “al-Khalidi was concerned with long-term rights and obligations based in history,” while in contrast “Ben-Yehuda focused on contemporary mundane economics” when stressing that Jewish immigration could and would improve living conditions of the peasant population (328).

While Gribetz, following the approach of Vincent Lemire (“living together” as the “hallmark of all urban culture”) (328), does diagnose at least the potential of *citadinité* in Jerusalem after the Young Turk Revolution, another contributor to this volume, Louis Fishman (Brooklyn College, CUNY) is much more skeptical and focuses on the limitations of *citadinité* in the same period (510–29). In contrast to Gribetz, he concludes his article on a very sober and pessimistic note: “There was no shared, horizontal sense of equality and brotherhood” (529).

Fishman’s focus is the process of the establishment of separate national communities, obviously, first and foremost, the Jewish community. He argues that this process happened separately and did not lead to the development of “a sense of a mutual homeland” (529). “Despite good relations between Arabs and Jews within certain neighborhoods, and despite participation in joint government ceremonies, which can be interpreted as concrete examples of *citadinité*, both communities were being coopted into new national groupings” (529).

This focus on national groupings is taken up in the contribution by Jens Hanssen (University of Toronto) in “Municipal Jerusalem in the Age of Urban Democracy: On the Difference between What Happened and What is Said to Have Happened” (262–80).

Hanssen agrees with Gribetz, that “in the Ottoman empire, the capital of Palestine was a site of urban experiments in democracy” (263). In contrast to both Gribetz and even more so Fishman, he includes the role of European colonialism and “the structures of occupation and Zionist supremacy” (263) in his analysis. His question at the beginning of his article is programmatic: Can these experiments in democracy in Ottoman Jerusalem, in the end, lead to a new reality, in which “Palestinian and Israeli cities become models of coexistence” (263). His answer obviously must leave future developments open, and he builds this interpretation on the work of Paul Ricoeur (“the unfulfilled future of the past forms perhaps the richest part of tradition”) and even more so Walter Benjamin (“the forgotten promise of this history today... carries a hidden inventory by which it points to redemption”) (263).

Hanssen argues that the Open Jerusalem project needs to try and end the “long-standing empirical silencing of Palestinians” (265) and instead “write the Palestinian struggle into history” (264). At the basis of this endeavor, or so he continues his argument, the project needs to be aware of the four-stage silencing “in the process of historical production” (264): first, “when actors enter the historical record (silences in the creation of fact)”; second, “when historical facts are assembled (silences produced by the archive)”; third, “when data is retrieved (silences produced in historical narratives)”; and fourth, “the silences produced by particular theoretical choices” (264).

In the second part of his chapter, Hanssen raises the question of urban democracy with a wealth of fascinating and often quite surprising new information, not least based on his work on Beirut, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital*.<sup>1</sup> He shows how intellectuals in al-Mashreq started to discuss “the meanings and applications of democracy (*al-dimukratīyya*), freedom (*al-ḥurrīyya*), equality (*al-musawāt*), and voting rights (*haqq al-intikhāb*).” He focuses in particular on the Beirutí Butrus Bustani who wrote that “in this day and age, we can say that democracy is rule

based on elections governed by laws . . . . As for the [recent Ottoman] elections, they are expressions of public opinion' [*al-rayy al-'amm*]," although he noted that Bustani was "still skeptical that 'democracy had ever existed, or will ever rule except on paper' some ten years after the first municipal elections."

It will be the task of future researchers to look at similar discussions and ideas in Ottoman Jerusalem. Without doubt, Ruhi al-Khalidi – about whom we learn a great deal in the chapter written by Gribetz – would be one of the first to study. We can also return to the work done by the late Alexander Scholch on Ruhi's uncle Yusuf Diya' al-Din al-Khalidi, based on papers located in al-Khalidi library in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

I should like to add a note of caution concerning the attempt to focus too much on the view from below. After all, elite families and notables continued to determine politics: for example, "of the sixteen Jerusalem mayors between 1863 and 1910, only four were not from the Khalidi, 'Alami, and Husayni families" (280). After all, Hanssen himself makes us aware of the fact that we do not witness universal suffrage or mass participation in Ottoman cities, and certainly not in Ottoman Jerusalem, before 1908 (and also after, we should add). Municipal elections "were severely circumscribed by class, gender, and urban residence biases" (269). Still, it is necessary, as postulated by Janssen, for "urban historians today to move beyond the politics of notables" (270). At least in Beirut (obviously different from Jerusalem, or so it would seem) "municipal coalitions coalesced across lines of kinship and sectarianism. Instead, economic interests (merchants versus landowners), educational background (Muslim, missionary, state schools), and professional affiliations played a role" (271).

Another note of caution is in place, when Janssen harbors "disappointment at the lack of radical politics in and around municipal councils, compared to the Mediterranean anarchists whom Ilham Khouri-Makdisi resurrected for us, or compared to the municipal socialism that William Cohen spotted in France" (273). Only additional research, in other cities of the region, will enable us to give further answers.

Returning to look at the complete volume under review, without doubt readers today, but above all future researchers, will find a wealth of information, new materials from newly investigated archives, new and sometimes surprising and at the same time fascinating new analyses – and above all new questions. Suffice it to mention the following articles: Maria Chiari Rioli's research on "Visiting Cards" in Jerusalem (29–49); "Collective Petitions" as a new source for "Jerusalem's Networks of *Citadinité*" by Yasemin Avci, Vincent Lemire, and Ömür Yazici Özdemir (161–85); "Epidemiology" and the health sector in Jerusalem by Philippe Bourmaud (440–56); and the "The Tramway Concession of Jerusalem, 1908–1914" by Sotirios Dimitriadis (475–89) with its focus on "the abortive modernization of a late Ottoman City" (475).

What surprises a reviewer with a German background is the fact that Gustav Dalman's work is neither referred to in the bibliography, nor in any of the contributions in the book. Missing also are in-depth new studies, with a new approach, of the Schneller School, Talitha Kumi School, and Schmidt's Girls College in Jerusalem and the way "ordinary Jerusalemites" interacted with these institutions and how these institutions impacted the life of ordinary Palestinians for generations to come.

It is to be hoped that young Palestinian scholars will take up their own studies and research based on the invaluable contributions of the book presented here. Much still needs to be done and the volume under review is just a start, albeit a fulminant one.

Students of Jerusalem can also find a tremendous wealth of material for their own studies at the website of the Open Jerusalem Project ([www.openjerusalem.org](http://www.openjerusalem.org)). Hopefully, the website will eventually include links to other websites with archival materials on Jerusalem in particular, and Palestine in general.

Students of Jerusalem should continue to follow the collaborative approach taken by the editors of this volume. I would argue that only in this way can we do justice to the lives – increasingly difficult and hard – of ordinary citizens in this extraordinary city of Jerusalem.

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#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siecle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 2 Alexander Schoelch, “Ein palaestinensischer Repraesentant der Tanzimat Periode: Yusuf Diya’addin al-Halidi (1842–1906),” *Der Islam* 57, no. 2 (1980): 311–22. Available in English in Alexander Scholch, *Palestine in Transformation, 1856–1882* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1993), 241–52.