The Shrines of the ‘Alids in Medieval Syria

by Stephennie Mulder

A Sample From Chapter 2: Aleppo: An Experiment in Islamic Ecumenism

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SUNNIS, SHI’IS AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF COEXISTENCE

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CHAPTER TWO

Aleppo: An Experiment in Islamic Ecumenism

Aleppo once had two medieval gates in its western wall (Map 2). The southermost of these gates still stands, at the western terminus of the main market street that leads from the citadel. As in the medieval period, it is known today as the Bab Antakya (Antioch Gate). Exiting this gate, a pilgrim today will find a road that crosses over the river Quwayq and follows the river’s winding path as it eventually turns southward. About 1.5km from the city wall, this southbound road passes near a low hill. On the eastern flank of the hill, which was known in the medieval period as the Jabal Jawshan, sit two medieval shrines overlooking the city. The larger, northernmost shrine commemorates al-Husayn. About 300m to the south is another shrine devoted to al-Muhassin, the stillborn son of al-Husayn. Before 2011, over a million pilgrims a year from many locations throughout the Islamic world participated in organised tours to these sites, and a visitor could observe these pious supplicants as they emerged in a seemingly incessant stream from the tour buses and cars that continuously parked in the large car park in front of the site. Although Aleppo once had many Shi‘i shrines, including two shrines to ‘Ali, a mashhad to Sidi Ghawth1 and others, the shrines to al-Husayn and al-Muhassin on the Jabal Jawshan were the largest and most significant, and they remain so today.2 In the Seljuk, Zangid and Ayyubid eras, they were the locus of medieval Syria’s most highly invested experiment in pragmatic toleration and cooperation between Sunnis and Shi‘is.

The architects of this experiment were a group of Aleppo’s rulers in the period from the late tenth to the twelfth century. One of these sovereigns consciously used the shrines to promote such cooperation as part of a larger project of sectarian conciliation. The actions of several other rulers indicate that such cooperation was probably an implicit motivation for their act of patronage. In the end, two buildings of extraordinary beauty emerged from these multiple investments, one of them a true masterwork of Ayyubid architecture. Yet it is a bit strange that such lavish buildings would be erected to commemorate an obscure figure and an ephemeral event that were otherwise unknown in Islamic history. In an ironic inversion of the
expected, the ‘Alid shrines of Aleppo, devoted to relatively little-known episodes of Shi’i martyrology, are far more elaborate than their counterparts in Damascus, where – as we shall see in the following chapter – the remains of much more important ‘Alid figures were housed in strikingly small-scale, modest constructions.

This irony is perhaps explained by a simple fact of demography, for Aleppo, unlike Damascus, was a Shi’i-controlled city for much of its medieval history. Thus, these shrines are the product of a particular moment in that history in which it was advantageous to propitiate the city’s Shi’i population. In this environment, Aleppo’s patrons had far greater freedom to endow projects that benefited Shi’i practice than did their Damascene equivalents. Indeed, by the Ayyubid period, the population of northern Syria and Mesopotamia had a long-established inclination toward Shi’ism. A large proportion of the Muslims of Aleppo were Shi’i, as were the inhabitants of numerous surrounding towns.3 In the mid-eleventh century, Nasir-i Khusrau reports that the cities of the Syrian littoral, such as Tripoli, Baalbek, Sidon, Tyre and Tiberias, had a majority of Shi’is.4 Many inland towns, such as Homs, Hama and Damascus, sheltered a significant, and vocal, Shi’i minority. This so disturbed a staunch
Sunni like Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) that he paused in his travel narrative to grumble about their excessive numbers and sue for preservation from their heresies:

In these lands the Shi‘is are an astonishing phenomenon. They are more numerous than the Sunnis, and they have disseminated their doctrines everywhere. They are divided into different sects . . . the Rafidis . . . the Imamis, the Zaydis . . . the Isma‘ilis, the Nusayris – who are infidels because they attribute divinity to ‘Ali [may God be pleased with him] – . . . the Ghurabiyya – who claim that ‘Ali resembles the Prophet PBUH . . . as well as other sects one shrinks from enumerating. God has misled them and has misled many of his creations. We beg of God to protect us in [true] religion and seek refuge in Him from the deviations of the heretics [zaygh al-mulhidin].5

No doubt this apparent flourishing of Shi‘ism was encouraged by the fact that Syria was under the political control of Shi‘i dynasties for much of its medieval history, although precisely how and to what degree this officially sanctioned Shi‘ism succeeded in winning over the general population is somewhat unclear. However it is apparent that in northern, central and coastal Syria, as well as selected cities in other areas, Shi‘i rule had a palpable effect on conversion. In some cities, it seems Shi‘ism made inroads at an early stage: al-Muqaddasi (d. c. 1000) reports that regarding allegiance to theological schools, the people of Syria are rightly guided, and upholders of authority and tradition [i.e., Sunni]. The people of Tiberias, however, and half the population of Nablus and Qadas, and most of the people of ‘Amman, are Shi‘a.6

However, Shi‘i political control – if it were indeed an impetus for Shi‘i popular allegiance – did not have the same outcome in southern Syria as it did in the area of north-central Syria and the Jazira. Though the Isma‘ili Fatimids controlled southern Syria until the mid-twelfth century, Shi‘ism remained a marginal presence there, with the exception of the Shi‘i movement of the Druze, which became entrenched in the area of the Hawran under the rule of the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021). This heterodox faction, along with some small groupings of Imami [Twelver] Shi‘is, seems always to have been a minority in the south, which remained predominantly Sunni.7 In particular, the large cities such as Damascus maintained a strong commitment to Sunnism and sheltered only a small minority of Shi‘i inhabitants.

In north-central Syria and the Jazira, however, the strength of Shi‘ism was such that the Shi‘a were able to practise openly for many
centuries, encouraged by the leadership of several Shi‘i dynasties. In Mesopotamia, the Shi‘i Hamdanids had become the ‘Abbasid amirs of Mosul in 905 and slowly extended their reach, capturing Aleppo, Antakya and Homs in 944. The Hamdanid ‘Ali ibn ‘Abdallah, who took the regnal title of Sayf al-Dawla, met little resistance when he captured Aleppo. He made the city his capital and surrounded himself with a glittering court that included the most famous poets, philosophers and litterateurs of the day. He also encouraged the immigration of Shi‘i ‘ulama’, thereby directly influencing the numerical expansion of Shi‘ism in northern Syria. In 977, the mosques of Aleppo began to use the Shi‘i formulas ‘Come to the best of works’ and ‘Muhammad and ‘Ali are the best of men’ as part of the call to prayer.

The capture of Aleppo by the Sunni Seljuks did not diminish the region’s Shi‘i tendencies. It seems, for example, that in the tenth and eleventh centuries, most of the tribal groups on the desert fringes were Shi‘i, many of them Isma‘ili or heterodox branches. The last Seljuk prince of Aleppo, Ridwan ibn Tutush (r. 1095–1113) found himself under such strong local Shi‘i pressure that he actually ordered that the khutba be pronounced in the name of the Fatimid caliph, demonstrating that several decades of Sunni rule had done little to alter local allegiances. Shortly thereafter, even the archetypal Sunni ruler Nur al-Din hesitated to enforce official Sunnism on the city. According to the twelfth century Shi‘i chronicler Ibn Abi Tayyi’i, Nur al-Din initially
conformed to the attitude of his father [‘Imad al-Din Zangi], with full regard for the Aleppan Shi’is, and, far from troubling them, let them practise their prayer openly in conformance with their rites in the eastern part of the great mosque, and make the call to prayer from the minarets of Aleppo according to their formula ‘Come to the best of works!’

Ibn Abi Tayyi’ continues that his father had told him that in his time, even the mosque of the citadel (the residence of the Sunni ruler of Aleppo) still used the Shi’i formula. This was allowed to continue until political expediency intervened in 1146–7, when Nur al-Din wished to consolidate his position by making a treaty with the Sunni prince of Damascus. The liaison was threatened by an alliance of Aleppan and Damascene Sunni notables, who conspired to pressure Nur al-Din to renounce what they felt was his too-favourable attitude toward the Shi’is of Aleppo.

Even so, the edict against the Shi’i call to prayer was not seriously enforced until two years later in 1148. Despite considerable political pressure from the Sunnis, Nur al-Din had been reluctant to follow through, as he feared loss of control over the city, and he was right. When he finally prohibited the Shi’i formula, riots erupted, and Nur al-Din was forced to exile some Shi’i leaders who stubbornly refused to conform. Later, after Nur al-Din died, the population’s apprehension about the policies of his successor al-Salih Isma’il, who had a strong attachment to Sunnism, provoked yet another a violent reaction from the Shi’is of Aleppo. According to Ibn al-‘Adim, they ‘pillaged the houses of [prominent Sunnis] Qutb al-Din Ibn al-‘Ajami and Baha’ al-Din Abu Ya’li Ibn Amin al-Dawla’. In retaliation, the soldiers of the citadel were ordered to destroy the house of Abu’l-Fadl Ibn al-Khashshab, the Shi’i qadi who had led the mob. Nevertheless, it was only a temporary setback and the Shi’is eventually regained some of the privileges revoked under Nur al-Din, including the right to pray in the eastern part of the great mosque.

At about this time, in the second half of the twelfth century, Aleppo also became an important centre for Shi’i scholarship. This was due to the residence there of several important scholars, chiefly Abu’l-Makarim Hamza ibn ‘Ali al-Halabi, who was known as Ibn Zuhra (d. 1189), and Muhammad ibn ‘Ali al-Sarawi al-Mazandarani, or Ibn Shah rashub (d. 1192). Because of their influence, for nearly half a century Aleppo was among the predominant centres of Shi’i learning in the Islamic world.

Nur al-Din’s control over Aleppo came to an end with his death and the acquisition of the city as the capital of an Ayyubid principality. It was during the Ayyubid period that Sunni tolerance toward the Shi’is of Aleppo reached its zenith, particularly under the rule of the Ayyubid al-Malik al-Zahir, who received the principality of
Aleppo from his father Saladin in 1176. Nowhere was al-Zahir’s pragmatically tolerant attitude more evident than in his patronage of the shrines of al-Muhassin and al-Husayn on the Jabal Jawshan. Nevertheless, long before the actions of al-Zahir, these shrines had already accumulated a complex prior history of both Sunni and Shi’i patronage.

The Mashhad al-Muhassin (Mashhad al-Dikka)

The first sovereign to take an interest in building Shi’i shrines in Aleppo was the Shi’i Hamdanid ruler of Aleppo, Sayf al-Dawla (r. 944–67). He prefigured the twelfth century trend toward the ‘discovery’ of holy sites when he founded the Mashhad al-Muhassin, which commemorates a previously unknown, stillborn child of al-Husayn (Figs 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3). The shrine is located at the southern end of Jabal Jawshan and its main entrance is accessed by a long flight of stairs, making the front façade difficult to see properly from the base of the hill. The shrine is built around a rectangular courtyard and consists of a domed tomb chamber on the south-east corner accessed through a slightly smaller domed vestibule, a triple-domed prayer hall on the south wall, and latrines and facilities for cooking and study in the north-east, north and west (Fig. 2.2). Its rather austere stone muqarnas portal is among the earliest in Islamic architecture (Figs 2.4 and 2.5). The mashhad’s physical structure and constitution, as well as the architectural phasing, have been recorded and analysed twice; first by Ernst Herzfeld in the 1950s, and more recently by Terry Allen. There are two published plans of the building, one a less detailed version by Jean Sauvaget, and the other, depicting accurate projections of the vaulting, by Herzfeld (Fig. 2.2).

The shrine was originally called the Mashhad al-Dikka because Sayf al-Dawla had a terrace or dikka there from where he watched horse races below. It was ‘rediscovered’, according to a common topos, when Sayf al-Dawla had a dream about the site. In the dream, he stood on the balcony of his house overlooking the town and saw lights repeatedly descend at a location on the Jabal Jawshan. When he awoke, he rode personally to the place he had dreamed about and began digging there. To his amazement a tombstone was found precisely where the lights had descended, engraved in the name of a certain al-Muhassin b. al-Husayn b. ‘Ali b. Abi Talib, designating this location as his grave.

Visions, dreams and miraculous occurrences are common features of Shi’i shrine foundation stories. The phenomenon seems not to have been as prominent in Sunni piety. If we include the Mashhad al-Muhassin, Ibn al-Shaddad records seven instances of miraculous, dream-inspired Shi’i architectural foundation stories in Aleppo, five of them involving visions of ‘Ali, the sixth the flashes of light seen
Figure 2.1  Mashhad al-Muhassin, view of entrance portal and east wall. The inscription of Zangi is visible in the frame on the left, above a blocked entrance into the tomb chamber. Photo: Terry Allen

Figure 2.2  Aleppo, Mashhad al-Muhassin (Mashhad al-Dikka), plan. Illustration: The Ernst Herzfeld Papers. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
by Sayf al-Dawla and the seventh a shepherd’s dream of an unidentified man, who appears in the foundation story of the Husayn shrine (to be discussed below). Although Sunnis also had miraculous dreams and visions, they appear to have been used less frequently to spur or justify the foundation of shrines. The tenth to thirteenth centuries saw a great increase in the experience of such events by medieval Muslims.

Despite the ubiquity of such accounts, the story of the discovery of this site and the identity of the holy figure buried there was the cause of some controversy. Ibn al-‘Adim (d. 1262) notes that he had read ‘in the writings of one of the Aleppans’ that it was ‘a worthless place, until the prisoners of al-Husayn and his wife and children (peace be upon them) passed there (on their way to Damascus following the battle of Karbala)’. According to this account, there was a mine on the mountainside near where the Karbala’ prisoners camped. Thirsty from the journey, the pregnant wife of al-Husayn approached the miners and asked them for water. The miners refused her request and abused her. Presumably because of this incident, which implies she was raped, she miscarried her child and buried him near the camp on the mountainside. She cursed the miners, and in a stroke
of poetic justice their mine was thereafter as barren as her womb, for ‘whoever works on it gains nothing but exhaustion’. Ibn al-‘Adim adds that this story was confirmed directly for him by one of the Shi‘i shaykhs of Aleppo. The story has many of the hallmarks of Shi‘i
martyrology and probably grew from a desire to explain the presence of an abandoned mine near the shrine.

This foundation story reappears in the sources a generation later, in Ibn Shaddad’s history of Syria and the Jazira, but this time the source for the hagiographic material is explicit. He writes on the authority of the Shi’i historian Ibn Abi Tayyi’ (d. 1228–33) that
when Sayf al-Dawla found the grave marker, he queried the Shi‘i leaders of Aleppo about the existence of a son of al-Husayn named al-Muhassan. Their response seems to reflect some ambivalence:

Some of them replied: ‘We have not heard this, but we have heard that Fatima (peace be upon her) was pregnant and the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: in your belly is al-Muhassan. And when the Day of [swearing the oath of] Allegiance (yawm al-bay‘a) arrived, they forced their way into her house to bring ‘Ali (peace be upon him) out to swear the oath, and she miscarried.’ And others of them said: ‘It is possible that when the captive women of al-Husayn arrived in that place one of his women miscarried that boy.’

Others pointed out that the writing on the stone was ancient, indicating the locale was of great antiquity. The phrases ‘some of them,’ ‘others of them’ make clear there was dissent between the city’s Shi‘i leaders regarding the authenticity of the shrine. There also seems to have been uncertainty as to whether it was a son of ‘Ali or a son of al-Husayn that was buried there, as indicated by the account of Fatima’s miscarriage. At this point in the narrative, for the first time, there is mention of the body of an actual miscarried foetus, whose miraculous lack of decay the Shi‘i scholars used to bolster the argument that it was that of the son of al-Husayn. Despite these scholarly controversies, among the people, the wondrous story quickly spread, and there was growing pressure to build a mashhad. Sayf al-Dawla appears not to have taken sides. He simply remarked that ‘God has given me permission to build in this place in the name of our Master al-ibtighā’an wijdhatā God most high and becoming closer to Him, in the name of our Master al-Muhassan ibn al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him). The most exalted Amir Sayf al-Dawla Abu al-Husayn ‘Ali ibn Abdallah ibn Hamdan.’

Nothing remains from Sayf al-Dawla’s original construction, and the building that stands today is a palimpsest of later additions and renovations (Fig. 2.2). Ibn Shaddad reports that the Shi‘i historian Ibn Abi Tayyi‘ claimed to have visited it in the days when the portal of Sayf al-Dawla still stood. He described the portal:

I entered the door of that mashhad. It is a small door made of black stone with a vault over it. There is a broad inscription in Kufic writing on it [which reads]: ‘This blessed mashhad was built for the purpose of turning toward (ibtighā’an wijdhatā) God most high and becoming closer to Him, in the name of our Master al-Muhassan ibn al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him). The most exalted Amir Sayf al-Dawla Abu al-Husayn ‘Ali ibn Abdallah ibn Hamdan.’

Ibn Abi Tayyi‘ adds that in the days of the Mirdasids [r. 1023–79] the shrine gained a large structure in its northern section. But like the work of Sayf al-Dawla, this structure is now gone, and the building
as it stands today is entirely the work of Sunni patrons. Nor were these patrons' acts mere token gestures, but rather they represented a major investment of private and state resources. These acts were ongoing throughout the period of Sunni Revival.

The first Sunni to contribute was the Seljuk governor of Aleppo, Qasim al-Dawla Aq Sunqur, who ensured the functionality of the shrine by adding a cistern on the south (qibli) side in 1089. He also entirely rebuilt the southern wall, which was beginning to fall, built a small enclosure around the tomb that was ornamented with silver colonnettes, donated a fine cloth cover for the cenotaph and endowed the shrine with the income from fields and a mill to ensure its upkeep.

In 1124, after the death of the Seljuk emir Ridwan b. Tutush – the emir who had briefly allowed the khutba to be said in the name of the Fatimid caliph [see above] – the crusader Count Joscelin I of Edessa laid siege to Aleppo. During the siege an interesting episode occurred at the Mashhad al-Muhassin. As the blockade wore on, the Crusaders burned and pillaged the shrines on the outskirts of the city. But when they came to the shrine of al-Muhassin, instead of sacking it straightaway, they entered the tomb area and excavated the grave. This looks at first glance like a simple act of desecration, but Ibn al-‘Adim, who reports the episode in both of his histories of Aleppo, each time ends the account by saying ‘they descended into it [the grave], and didn’t find anything [or did not see anything] in it, so they burned it’. The description of this event suggests that the Crusaders pillaged the shrine only after ensuring that the grave did not contain the body of a holy figure. It is difficult to find an unambiguous explanation for this, but it suggests that for the Crusaders there was some value or interest in verifying claims made about holy sites. In any case, the pillaging of the Mashhad al-Muhassin provoked a well-known episode of Christian persecution in Aleppo, as reported by Ibn al-‘Adim:

When [the Seljuk regent and Shi‘i qādī] Abu al-Fadl ibn al-Khashshab was deputised and managing the affairs of the city during the siege, he changed the churches of the Christians in Aleppo into mosques by ordaining for them mihrabs facing the qibla. I heard this from my father, may God have mercy upon him, and he heard it from his father.

This vengeful action, which included the conversion of the great Byzantine cathedral founded by Flavia Helena Augusta, the mother of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine, testifies to the importance of the shrines, and perhaps in particular of the shrine to al-Muhassin, for the people of Aleppo.

Following this incident, the shrine continued to benefit from the interest of Sunni rulers. In the mid-twelfth century, although rather
unusually the Arab chroniclers do not report it, the Atabeg Zangi funded work on the shrine, as is evident from an inscription, probably not in situ, located on the eastern external wall of the tomb chamber, above a blocked doorway [Fig. 2.1]. It is a large inscription, in Kufic contained within a frame, and it records unspecified work on the shrine in Zangi’s name in the year 1142–3. Just below this inscription is evidence that Zangi’s son Nur al-Din also contributed to the upkeep of this ‘Alid shrine. The inscription is small and rather disfigured, but according to Ibn Shaddad, Nur al-Din ordered the construction of a cistern and a spacious latrine or area for ablutions with multiple stalls (midā ḵīḥā buyūṭ kathīra), a gesture for which both pilgrims and residents were grateful.38 This is probably the present groin-vaulted cubical projection the north-east corner of the building. Herzfeld records the presence of latrines, however none is visible today.39 Relying on these inscriptions, Herzfeld thought that the tomb chamber, which consists of a domed room on squinches preceded by a smaller domed anteroom, also on squinches, must be attributed to Zangi, but Terry Allen has disputed this, proposing a slightly later date.40 The architectural details of the tomb area, with its small squinches set on little projecting knobs at their springing, and tiny, single muqarnas cells at the point of transition to the dome, are consistent with a twelfth-century date [Fig. 2.3].41 Another notable feature of this tomb chamber are two marble columns with lyre-shaped capitals, which support the transverse arch dividing the anteroom from the main tomb area. As several scholars have noted, lyre-shaped capitals are rare in Syrian monuments and are more typically associated with Mesopotamia.42

After these interventions, the shrine grew in importance, and by the Ayyubid period, the Mashhad al-Muhassin had become one of the most beloved Shi’i pilgrimage sites in Aleppo. Ibn al-‘Adim writes that in the thirteenth century ‘the Shi’is of Aleppo have great veneration for it and make many visits there’.43 Several major expansions occurred during the period of Ayyubid sovereignty. In 1197–8, the mayor (raʾis) of Aleppo, Safi al-Din Tariq b. ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Balisi, an appointee of Saladin who was known by the name Ibn Turayra, demolished the original portal built by Sayf al-Dawla and added an impressive new one vaulted in stone muqarnas [Figs. 2.3, 2.4 and 2.6]. This is the portal remaining today, notable for being one of the earliest preserved stone muqarnas vaults in Syria.44 The mayor’s nephew, Wali al-Din Abu al-Qasim ibn ‘Ali, who was himself mayor a decade later, tore down the door of the reservoir that had been built by the Seljuk Aq Sunqur in 1089, and rebuilt it in his name. He was later buried there, though no trace of the tomb or of the reservoir on the south side remains.45

A few years later, in 1212–13, al-Malik al-Zahir Ghazi [r. 1186–1216], the son of Saladin and the Ayyubid sultan of the principality of Aleppo, undertook a major restoration of the mashhad after the
Another Ayyubid sultan, the son of al-Malik al-Zahir, al-Malik al-‘Aziz (r. 1216–36), rebuilt the north wall of the courtyard, which had fallen down, in 1234–5 (Fig. 2.11). This wall bears what is possibly the Mashhad al-Muhassin’s most remarkable feature: an inscription near its north-east corner in the name of the Sunni Sultan al-‘Aziz, which praises the twelve Shi‘i Imams, to which we shall return later (Fig. 2.12). Regarding the patron, the architectural and the textual evidence are at odds. Ibn Shaddad records that the reconstruction of the north wall was done not by al-‘Aziz, but by his son, al-Malik al-Nasir Yusuf, who also built the contemporaneous cupola (rawshan al-dā’ir) in the prayer hall of the courtyard (bi-qā’at al-sahn). This, incidentally, would also mean that the antemīhrāb dome was built,

**Figure 2.6** View upward into stone muqarnas dome over entrance. Photo: Author
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