

PRE-20TH CENTURY HISTORY

Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation 1808–1918,

by Stefan Weber. 2 volumes. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2009. Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus V. 662 pages. \$245.

Reviewed by James Reilly

This remarkable study opens new paths for comprehending the modern history of the Middle East. By carefully mapping and recording the material fabric of Damascus in the last Ottoman century, Stefan Weber offers readers new ways of thinking about Arab, Syrian, and Ottoman modernity. An exhaustive and beautifully produced study, Weber's two volumes look at changes in public and private architecture, in how people furnished and decorated their homes, and in how they lived and dressed. Its major thesis is that Damascenes were agents of historical change. Until the end of Ottoman rule in 1918 they actively synthesized international and local tastes and understandings. They also became more, not less, "Ottoman" until the cataclysm of the First World War sundered the bonds of empire.

Weber's account of Ottoman Damascus builds on a number of earlier works, a body of literature that his work both synthesizes and surpasses. He is not the first historian of Ottoman Damascus to chart and analyze the dramatic changes of the 19th century and the new patterns of life, work, and politics that the era witnessed. A substantial body of literature has developed since the 1970s on these subjects.¹ But Weber is the first to demonstrate via careful empirical investi-

gation how these changes were reflected in the spheres of everyday life and practice. His analysis is also informed by comparative work that explores how the *étatist* Ottoman governments of the period forged novel relationships with society symbolized by new public architectural forms and organization of space.

The bedrock of Weber's work is an extensive survey of extant late-Ottoman public and private buildings in Damascus. Public buildings include both government and commercial structures. His survey data are represented in a series of highly detailed maps and plans. The first volume constitutes the text of his study, while volume II is a reference book for *every* locality or structure discussed in volume I. The structures, streetscapes and artwork that form his evidence are copiously illustrated through Weber's own photographs of surviving structures, or through historical photographs of properties that have been destroyed or of streetscapes that are substantially altered since the 1920s. His principal documentary sources are Damascus's Islamic law [*shari'a*] court registers, supplemented by literary accounts from Damascenes and visiting or resident foreigners, including European consular and diplomatic sources. The incorporation of German material is especially welcome here. Not only did the German Empire have significant political and commercial interests in late Ottoman Damascus, but many valuable photographs of the city in its final Ottoman years date from the presence of the German military mission during the First World War. It is to the credit of the Danish Institute in Damascus that no expense has been spared in reproducing hundreds of plans, maps, and photographs, many in vivid color.

Key to Weber's thesis is the concept of "entangled modernity" (Vol. 1, p. 18). That is, Damascenes entered the modern age at about the same time as people in other parts

1. Including the work of this reviewer, who is among those acknowledged in Weber's Preface.

of the world during the long 19th century that ended with the First World War. Yet this adoption of modernity was not simply a cultural, political, and economic transfer or adoption that flowed from Europe to the Middle East. Rather, new patterns of life and work, changes in taste, and redefinitions and renegotiations of public space were mediated by the Damascene population themselves. For Weber's subjects, the high-cultural model that counted most was Istanbul, and Damascenes' sense of being up to date, modern, and fashionable was formed in relationship with the Ottoman capital. Yet the Damascenes who took on these attributes adapted them to their own needs and tastes, drawing on local customs and expectations regarding building design and decoration. The elites of the city — Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike — shared in and forged this modernizing culture. Over the decades, different styles of building and design came in and out of fashion. Meanwhile, public government and commercial spaces were redesigned and renovated to meet the needs and expectations of the new age. The synthesis of new styles with local customs was further reflected in the patterns of development of popular, non-elite neighborhoods and housing. Weber's study suggests that new standards and models were first adapted by Damascus's striving elites, and subsequently trickled down to enclose and affect broader sections of the population. The sketchiest part of Weber's argument is its application to popular classes including the poor, who did not leave written records and whose material traces were the first to disappear.

The material, data, and arguments in this book will interest social and political historians of the Middle East, plus comparative historians of cities, of art and of architecture, as well as a wider scholarly audience engaged with the concept of "entangled modernity." Moreover, there is a wider public education

value here. Weber's study demonstrates that much of what Syrians and non-Syrians alike associate with "traditional" Damascus — aristocratic courtyard houses decorated in Ottoman baroque style, long covered markets, heavy wood furnishings inlaid with mother-of-pearl — are in fact artifacts and expressions of the modern age. The "traditional" old city that survives today is largely the product of the last Ottoman century. Indeed, "nearly the entire residential building stock of Damascus was renewed and modern forms were integrated in the city's housing" in the course of the long 19th century (Vol. 1, p. 462). In ways both subtle and implacable, Weber demonstrates that "tradition" itself exists primarily in the mind of the beholder, as an ideological abstraction rather than as a useful historical or analytic category.

And the pictures are gorgeous! These volumes will be equally at home in an academic office and on a living room coffee table.

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WOMEN

Militant Women of a Fragile Nation, by Malek Abisaab. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010. 300 pages. \$45.

Reviewed by Rola el-Husseini

I read Malek Abisaab's *Militant Women of a Fragile Nation* with great pleasure. His nuanced discussion of the role of women in labor movements is an understudied area of Lebanese history. Abisaab uses archival research and the analysis of labor-activist memoirs, complemented by interviews with 44 former employees, to present us with a case study of the "Ré-