PRE-20TH CENTURY HISTORY


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 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 investiga-

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


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-