Books

Urbanism

Ethel Sara Wolper
Cities and Saints: Sufism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Medieval Anatolia

In the short and elegant *Cities and Saints: Sufism and the Transformation of Urban Space in Medieval Anatolia*, Ethel Wolper examines the dervish lodges erected in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in three Anatolian cities—Amasya, Sivas, and Tokat—and the way in which they fostered Sufi traditions and practices. Discussing the institutions from the perspectives of architecture, dynastic history, and religious practice, she raises questions about their urban functions and their role in mediating “different types of authority—religious, spiritual, and political.”

Architecturally, the monuments are vividly presented with very good photographs and newly drawn plans of the buildings and their urban locations.

The author’s integrated approach rests on a variety of sources, including the monuments and their inscriptions, chronicles, travelers’ accounts, hagiographic literature, and waqfiyyas (endowment deeds). Wolper makes good use of these texts to provide a richly nuanced picture of the dervish lodge as an urban feature, a node of Sufi identity, an interface of religious syncretism, and a pole of opposition to the high religious culture of the ruling Seljuk elite. However, she utilizes rather poorly the waqfiyyas—the only primary source available—whose prescriptive details were often neglected in later periods. This discrepancy could have been minimized by examining references to the waqfiyyas in later medieval documents, which exist in great quantities in Turkish archives. These sources would also have been useful in tracing the later functional and symbolic history of the medieval dervish lodge and perhaps link its development with the Ottoman dervish lodge.

In fact, for the nonspecialist, the book is rather too restrictive, both in its historical range and geographic focus. Why concentrate exclusively on these three cities? Did other towns and cities also have such lodges, and did those fulfill similar functions? Even if these institutions could not be directly and thoroughly treated in this book, it would have been informative to discuss them comparatively in a separate chapter. Omitting any coverage of the dervish lodge in southern Anatolia seems especially problematic when we learn that the Baba Rasul rebellion, a central event, was centered in the towns and cities of that region.

A comparative perspective might have also ameliorated the author’s rather overstated opposition between the madrasa and the dervish lodge, the former being the domain of official religious knowledge, the latter catering to a variety of ecstatic, esoteric, or generally extra-Islamic practices. Specifically, Wolper argues that “the madrasa reinforced the social distance between the local population, especially the Christian residents, and the governing elite,” whereas the dervish lodge fulfilled a more socially and religiously integrating function. In this respect, medieval Anatolia would seem to be exceptional when compared to the more Arabized regions south of it, where madrasas and Sufi institutions easily coexisted, sometimes in the same building.

Wolper further advances this polarized relationship between the dervish lodge and the madrasa by proposing that the former gradually and irreversibly replaced the latter, a process that led to the decentralization of Anatolian towns both physically and in terms of their sectarian affiliation. But this argument sidesteps a basic commonality, namely charity, shared by most extra-religious Islamic institutions, including the madrasa, the khanqah, the bimaristan, and the dervish lodge. In addition to their various specialized purposes, these entities provided food and shelter to their residents and often to passing visitors. Existing in a cultural continuum rather than in mutual opposition, these institutions served variously the educational, spiritual, and charitable needs of urban populations.

This shared function notwithstanding, it seems clear that architecturally the dervish lodge belongs to a lower level of patronage than contemporary madrasas, hospitals, or mosques. Unlike Anatolian madrasas with their monumental façades, symmetrical courtyards, and lavishly ornamented domes, these lodges generally consist of an asymmetrical agglomeration of domed chambers with little attention to monumentality or ornament. This striking difference from more “official” architecture and the rather inconsistent architectural form of the lodges themselves could have been better utilized to support the author’s contention about the contrasting functions and audiences of madrasas and dervish lodges.

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