

**SUFI MASTERS AND
THE CREATION OF
SAINTLY SPHERES IN
MEDIEVAL SYRIA**



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by
DAPHNA EPHRAT

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION, NAMES, AND DATES

IN GENERAL, I have adopted the system of transliteration of Arabic words and names used by the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam (EI3)*. For certain Arabic words and names that are commonly found in English texts or dictionaries and atlases, I have preferred the less technical form: for example, Sufi, not *Şūfī*; Ayyubids, not *Ayyūbids*; Baalbek, not *Ba'albek*. I have also frequently indicated the plural Arabic nouns simply by adding an "s" rather than giving the correct Arabic form (e.g. *ṭarīqas* rather than *ṭuruq*; *zāwiyas* rather than *zāwāyā*).

For the sake of convenience and the accessibility of the book to a wide readership in the field of medieval history, dates are generally given according to the Western calendar, except for dates of birth and death for which I have used both the Islamic (AH) and Western systems of dating.

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK EXPLORES the lives of Sufi masters who functioned as embodiments of Islamic sainthood and left a lasting mark on the land. These figures lived in the ancient cities of Syria and their surrounding towns and villages during a formative period in the social history of Syrian Sufism and the spiritual tradition of Islam.¹ In the course of the twelfth century, the free-floating world of earlier spiritual wayfarers in the central Islamic lands was yielding to local groups that came together around particular Sufi masters, called *shuyūkh al-ṣūfiyya* in Arabic sources, and congregated in specifically Sufi structures, known mostly by the terms *khānqāh* (Per.), *zāwiya* (Arab.), *ribāṭ* (Arab.), and *tekke* (Tur.). Sufi masters diffused their spiritual methods (*ṭarīqas*), put down local roots, gained leadership over small congregations of committed disciples and companions, and set forth to spread their teachings and diffuse their authority more broadly among the population. Gradually, the geographical and social horizons of their operation expanded. Their lodges proliferated, anchoring their presence in urban and rural environments, and eventually evolved into spiritual dominions.²

In this very period, an activist, community-oriented Sufi tradition in the form of piety that centred on Prophet Muḥammad was moving to the centre of the public religious and social life in the great cities and the small provincial towns of the eastern and near-eastern Islamic lands. While joining hands with traditionalists and legalists of the established Sunni rites (the *madhhabs*) in a Sunnization movement that set forth to shape Islamic religious and social life in light of the prophetic legacy, prominent representatives of this tradition claimed to be the most qualified to recast the tradition of God's Messenger.³ Similarly, alongside their adaptation to the traditional modes of authorization in transmitting and disseminating the prophetic legacy, Sufi shaykhs

1 In this book, I focus on the geographical area of Bilād al-Shām that stretches from Damascus in the south to the Euphrates to the north and east (see Fig. 1).

2 For general overviews, see J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–30; Jamil M. Abun-Nasr, *Muslim Communities of Grace: Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 80–86. See also Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 127–54, for the beginning of the spread of Sufism at the end of its formative period.

3 Historians have proposed that the terms Sunni “recasting” or “re-centering” more accurately describe what has been referred to as the “Sunni Revival.” For example, see Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: A View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 101, 126–27, 146–48; and Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 189–202. For an in-depth discussion of the distinctiveness and superiority of Sufism in the writings of the formulators of the main Sufi tradition, see Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an Age of Transition: ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), especially 140–48.

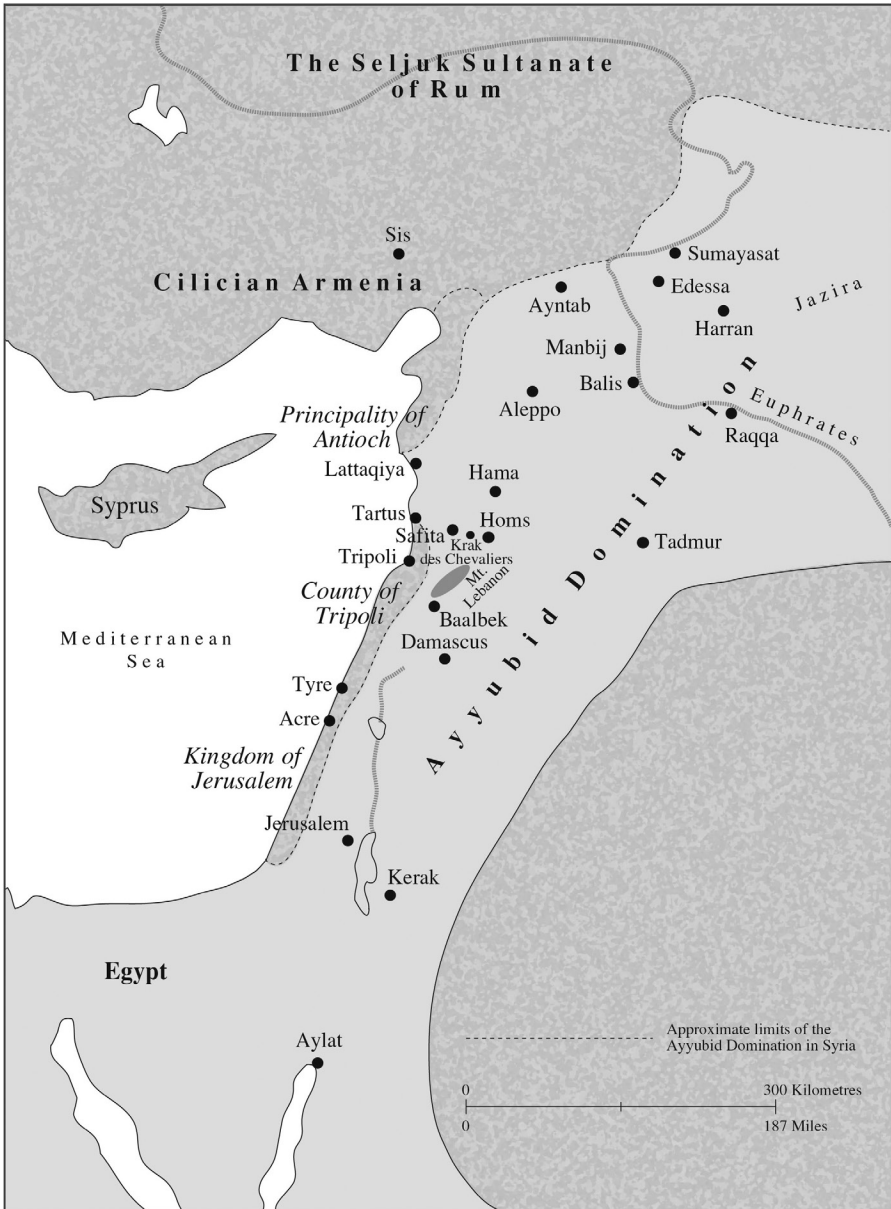


Figure 1. Syria (Bilād al-Shām) in the mid-thirteenth century. (Drawn by the author.)

devised their own ways of connecting to the prophetic *sunna* and cultivated their own forms and frameworks of constructing and diffusing authority. Operating outside the institutional and social channels through which jurists attempted to control religious knowledge and praxis, they extended their reach far beyond their inner circles.

In Bourdieusian terms, what came to be known as Sufism developed into a sub-field of cultural production within which those who monopolize the specific cultural capital devise strategies of sustaining and perpetuating their command.⁴

The elevation of the Sufi shaykh's authority to new heights and the expansion of his sphere of domination went hand in hand with the spread of the so-called cult of saints that, from the twelfth century onward, became central to the religious experience of all Muslims. Various individuals with Sufi affiliations were celebrated by their contemporaries as holy men or "Friends of God" (*awliyā' Allāh*), recognized as such during their lifetime or after their death. Not all of those considered God's Friends and channels to Him in Sufi circles were necessarily accorded saintly status by the public, and the widespread veneration of saintly figures had little to do with Sufi theories of closeness to God. Indeed, a glance at the standard biographical compilations that cover the cultural and historical context at hand reveals a category of ascetic saints with no sign of the mystical quest and no evidence of Sufi doctrine in their biographies. In this regard, Megan Reid, studying the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (from roughly 1170 to 1500 CE), provides abundant evidence of revered men and women from all social strata who emulated a distinct ascetic tradition that was modelled after early Islam's devotees and owed no particular allegiance to Sufism.⁵ Anne-Marie Eddé, for her part, argues that ascetic saints and Sufis in Ayyubid Aleppo were two distinct categories of holy people.⁶ At the same time, antinomian ascetics whose names are normally excluded from compilations composed by religious scholars and devoted to models of piety and virtue were venerated as God's Friends in their groups and beyond them.⁷ Yet, by the close of the thirteenth century, the number of Sufi shaykhs revered as holy by their disciples and companions and by the broader community of devotees was clearly on the rise. This merging of the Sufi and popular spheres of sainthood, or between sainthood as metaphysical "closeness" to God (*walāya*) and sainthood as the manifestation of spiritual power on the mundane plane (*wilāya*), found its most salient expression in pious visitation (*ziyāra*) to the lodge of the shaykh, and later to his gravesite.⁸ Ordinary

⁴ See especially Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984).

⁵ Megan Reid, *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6–35.

⁶ Anne-Marie Eddé, *La Principauté ayyubide d'Alep (579/1183–658/1260)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999), 412–22.

⁷ The most comprehensive study of these groups in medieval Islam is Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1500* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

⁸ Vincent Cornell was the first to distinguish between the two spheres of sainthood. See Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 272–73. Throughout, I follow Cornell and other historians of Islamic societies in retaining the most commonly used "non-Islamic" rendering of *walī* and *walāya*—namely, "saint" and "sainthood," as well as the cognate of "saintly." Although Cornell relates to an explicitly Moroccan context, his use of the terms may be well applied to other contexts, too. Here the cognate "saintly"

believers flocked to the homes and the graves of holy men to seek their divine and mundane intercession, to be near them, and to partake in the rituals of the Sufis.⁹ Some of the spaces and sites around the revered Sufi shaykhs developed as part of built environments, such as complexes of lodges, tombs, and shrines, whereas others were grounded in natural environments, such as caves and mountains. While some of these sites were permanent, others were fluid and shifting in nature, formed and revitalized wherever a saintly figure was (or was believed to be) present or buried, and left his mark on the land. Projecting the holy man's religious authority and believed to be suffused with spiritual power and capable of producing blessings (*baraka*), the concrete places acquired enduring functional and symbolic meaning.

Such developments were never monolithic. Instead, they were shaped in a concrete spatial frame in accommodation with local religious and social life and specific political order.¹⁰ In the context of the Syrian broader milieu, the rise of the Sufi shaykh holy man and the development of spaces that gave materiality to his presence and served as arenas of his *baraka* occurred in a historical setting marked by an overall religious vigour and a desire to re-sacralize the landscape for Islam, and in an environment rich in ancient holy places, Christian churches and monasteries.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, under the reign of the Zangids, the Ayyubids, and the early Mamluks, who set forth to restore and solidify the presence of Sunni Islam and its control over the land after a long period of crusader dominance, hundreds of new religious buildings were constructed to teach the Islamic religious and legal sciences and to harness Sufism, and long-forgotten holy sites were "rediscovered" and renovated, revitalizing the Islamic identity and sacrality of the landscape. An

is used to denote the sphere of religious charismatic authority and sanctity that surrounded the Sufi shaykh and Friend of God.

9 The most comprehensive work on the growth of the cult of Muslim saints in the Islamic medieval world is Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Josef W. Meri, "The Etiquette of Devotion in the Islamic Cult of Saints," in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, ed. James Howard-Johnston and Paul A. Hayward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 263–86, for the development of visits to the graves of venerated holy persons into a fundamental aspect of Muslim spirituality. For a comprehensive study of the visitations of the tombs of the dead during the Mamluk period, see Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). While focusing on Egypt (1200–1500), Taylor provides insightful observations on the evolution of the phenomenon of *ziyāra* and saint worship as a whole. See also his extensive bibliography on this field.

10 On the emergence of regional and local patterns in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt and Syria, see Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chap. 1; Richard J. A. McGregor, *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafā Sufi Order and the Legacy of Ibn 'Arabi* (Albany: SUNY, 2004), chap. 3; Daphna Ephrat, *Spiritual Wayfarers, Leaders in Piety: The Dissemination of Sufism in Medieval Palestine* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pt. 3; and Nathan Hofer, *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173–1325* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pt. 3.

increasing number of mystics, ascetics, and holy men, collectively called “Sufis,” were drawn to the region during this period of excitement and renewal. Native-born and newcomers diffused their authority beyond small local congregations and were granted unprecedented moral and material support by the political rulers, in return for their ideological support, prayers, and blessings.

On the more popular level, the growing prominence of Sufi masters and holy men followed on the heels of a general quest for charismatic religious leaders who would stimulate religious fervour in their devotees and perform the role of patron saints. Such abilities, which emerged from the demonstration of the virtues of these figures and the enactment of their spiritual powers, were pivotal in a period marked by continuous threats from external and internal enemies (Crusaders, Mongols, and extreme Shi‘i sects). Equally significant was the quest for figures capable of exerting their influence on the rulers who recognized their local power and prestige and believed in their spiritual potency and miracles.

Unlike their contemporaries in Upper Egypt studied by Nathan Hofer, who valorized and embodied an utterly miraculous authority rooted almost entirely in prophetically inherited access to the world of the unseen (*ghayb*), the charismatic Sufi shaykhs in the Syrian milieu did not conform to a single mode of authority.¹¹ Rather, they employed and enacted a variety of resources that were brought together on their road to sainthood. Nor was the scope of their activities confined to a specific environment. Some gained prominence in cities and mid-sized towns and villages, while others operated in both urban centres and rural areas. With the hinterlands of Syrian cities — particularly those surrounding Damascus, Aleppo, and Baalbek — connected to nearby towns and cities, and in the absence of a clear demarcation between urban and rural communities, Sufi shaykhs and God’s Friends diffused their authority across the entire social canvas of local societies.¹² A wave of their lodges swept up the entire region from the late twelfth century onwards and became centres of spiritual guidance and objects of visitation of men and women, seeking the saintly figures’ intersection with both the divine and mundane powers and partaking in the rituals of the Sufi community. Their graves, sanctified immediately after burial, expanded the horizons of a sacred landscape, ennobled with the tombs and memorials of biblical prophets, descendants, and companions of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the martyrs of the Counter-Crusade.

What were the resources and mechanisms the revered shaykhs living in the medieval Syrian milieu employed to construct and maintain their spiritual and charismatic authority in Sufi congregations, and the ways by which they diffused their authority more broadly among the population and served as patron saints and leaders of local communities? How were they embedded within their localities and associated with the glorious history of the ancient Syrian cities and their holiness inscribed in a landscape of sacred sites? These questions lie at the heart this study, which places the local and

¹¹ On which, see Hofer, *The Popularisation of Sufism*, 236–43.

¹² For more on these characteristics, see Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Muslim Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 55–68.

regional context of the social history of Sufism and the embedment and emplacement of Islamic sainthood at the centre of its inquiry.

The book draws primarily on biographical and hagiographical accounts in Arabic that narrate the lives of Sufi masters and holy men.¹³ In particular, I scrutinize narratives preserved in hitherto-unexplored saintly *vitas* (*manāqib*, “virtues and feats”) of three Sufi shaykhs which are still in manuscript form (listed here in accordance with the dates of their composition). The first is *Kitāb manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Aqīl al-Manbijī* (who died in the first half of the twelfth century) of the town of Manbij, northeast of Aleppo. The second is the *Manāqib al-Shaykh Abī Bakr ibn Qawām al-Bālisī* (d. 658/1258) of the town of Bālis on the western bank of the Euphrates river. The third is *Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī* (d. 617/1221), known as the “Lion of Syria” (*asad al-Sham*), of the village of Yūnīn near Baalbek in the Lebanon Valley.

The first and earliest saintly *vita* was composed by Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar, the grandson of Ibn Qawām al-Bālisī and one of the most famous Damascene Sufi shaykhs of his epoch (d. 718/1318), who collated accounts related by his father as well as by disciples and companions who orbited around the shaykh, first in his hometown of Bālis and later at the site of his burial place in the Damascene Šāliḥiyya neighbourhood on the slope of Mt. Qāsyūn. While the composition of the *vita* attests to the author’s dedication to the commemoration of his beloved grandfather, it could also have served to assert his family-based claim to spiritual authority in Sufi and scholarly circles in Damascus. Reflected in the *vita*, the significance accorded to family pedigree as a source of authority became increasingly apparent in Sufi writings, in particular hagiographies composed or reproduced in the early Ottoman period.¹⁴

More than 200 years later, large portions of the *vita* by the grandson of the great shaykh of Bālis were copied by Muḥammad ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 955/1548), the famous religious scholar, historian, and author of late Mamluk and early Ottoman Damascus. Here, the reproduction of the accounts in the *vita* of the Sufi saint may be seen as a reflection of the author’s general endeavour to reaffirm and perpetuate the merits of

13 These include accounts in *Ṭabaqāt al-awliyā’* (“classes of saints”) by ‘Umar Sirāj al-Dīn ibn Mullaqin (804/1401), a work which is rich in biographical accounts of earlier Sufi masters and lacks hagiographical flavor; *al-Kawākib al-durriyya fi tarājim al-sāda al-šūfiyya* by ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Munāwī (d. 1031/1621) on the collective lives of generations of Sufis and holy figures from the first Islamic century to the author’s time; and the modern work, *Jamī’ karāmāt al-awliyā’* by Yūsuf ibn Ismā‘il al-Nabhānī, a comprehensive collection composed of various versions of hagiographical narratives preserved in written form. For details about works of this type composed in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, see Éric Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (Damascus: Institut Français d’Études Arabes de Damas, 1995), 31–32.

14 On which, see Adam Sabra, “Household Sufism in Sixteenth-Century Egypt: The Rise of the Sāda al-Bakrīya,” in *Sufism in the Ottoman Era, 16th–18th Century*, ed. Rachida Chic and Catherine-Mayeur-Jaouen (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 2010), 101–18; Adam Sabra, “The Age of the Fathers: Gender and Spiritual Authority in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Ša’rānī,” *Annales Islamologiques* 47 (2013): 133–49.

the Šālihiyya, created by its scholarly and spiritual climate and sacred aura, to which he dedicated one of his famous treatises.¹⁵

The two other saintly vitas were compiled in the later Ottoman period, centuries after the lifetimes of the Sufi shaykhs they celebrate. The vita of Shaykh ‘Aqīl al-Manbijī was composed by a certain al-Hājj ‘Uthmān ibn al-Hājj Muḥammad al-‘Ūrānī al-Ḥalabī (of Aleppo). It commences with praises of the shaykh, God, and the Prophet, and the colophon with the signature of the author dates its completion to Dhū al-Ḥijja 1063 (October 1653). Attributed to a certain Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ‘Uthmān, the writing of the “The Book of the Virtues of Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī” was completed in 1157/1744. The hagiography itself, which has a few marginal notes leading the reader through the sixty-eight folios of the manuscript, ends on folio 67b, between which and the colophon there is a story about the vengeance of a certain Shaykh Sa‘īd against a tyrant in Tabaristan. On the five folios after the colophon, a story about the Prophet appears.

There is no information about the transmission, recording, and preservation of the accounts in the vitas over a long period. Nor are there any references to the lives and works of their authors in contemporary or later sources, such as biographical anthologies from the late Ottoman period, that may allow us to reconstruct the social and scholarly milieu within which they composed the vitas, their audience, or their reception. Still, the authors’ motivations in taking up the pen to commemorate saints of a bygone era can be gleaned from the works themselves.

The author of the vita of Shaykh ‘Aqīl al-Manbijī cannot be identified except for the reference to him by the name affix (*nisba*) that indicates Aleppo as his home city or place of origin. The first two pages of the vita are dedicated to the shaykh’s spiritual lineage, which leads to ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph and one of Islam’s most revered figures, and the work brims with praises of the “glorious town of Manbij” (*Manbij al-mafkhara*). From this, we may surmise that its author intended to perpetuate the memory of one of its most revered Sufi saints and to convey the splendour of the town and the region of Aleppo as a whole. Sometime later, the vita was reproduced by a certain Aḥmad ibn Yahyā ibn al-Shaykh ‘Aqīl. He traced his noble family lineage to Sahykh ‘Aqīl al-Manbijī and testified in the marginalia (reading note) that he “scrutinized it [and found it correct].”

As to the vita of Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī, its author presents himself throughout the text as a disciple of a renowned Sufi legal scholar of Baalbek and notes that he assembled accounts about the virtues and feats of ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī, his sons, and companions. Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad seems to have had a twofold goal. The first was to be linked to a lineage of celebrated shaykhs, biological and spiritual ancestors and models of virtue that extends back to ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī, whereas the second was to perpetuate the historical heritage of his hometown as a centre of Islamic religious learning, piety, and spirituality, and as a locus of Islamic revivalism during

15 In this respect, Stephan Conerman notes the loyalty Ibn Ṭūlūn felt towards his hometown under its changing rulers in “Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 955/1548): Life and Works,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 8 (2004: 115–40.).

the Counter-Crusader period. Accounts that narrate the life and deeds of the revered shaykh within his historical context and bolster his image as a warrior-saint, found in works by thirteenth-century Syrian historians, were probably copied out by the author of ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī’s vita. Other accounts preserved in his hagiographical work may have been transmitted either in written forms that have not survived, or orally from generation to generation of biological and spiritual descendants. It is also from the vita of ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī that another significant motivation for penning a hagiographical work comes to light: composing a work commemorating the life of a saint was seen as a pious act worthy of reward. At the very beginning of the vita, its author addresses the readers as follows:

Even if I dedicated my entire life [to the composition of this work], I could never be able to assemble and record all of the accounts about the virtues, feats, and mystical states (*manāqib*, *karāmāt*, and *aḥwāl*) of the shaykh, his sons, and the shaykhs that followed him, may God bless them all. Even so, my wish is that God will reward me for my book on the Day of Judgement.¹⁶

Indeed, as noted by historians of religious and intellectual life in the Ottoman period, the composition, copying, reproduction, and transmission of hagiographical works that commemorated the lives of Sufi saints were common scholarly pursuits and therefore were likely to have been highly valued in the milieus of the authors of the vitas.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the long time gap between the era of the Sufi saints and the lifetimes of the authors, the vitas, as well as other, later works, are valuable historical sources that can carry us back to the performative contexts on the ground of which the revered figures functioned in medieval Syria. This working hypothesis is based on several interrelated preliminary observations.

First, like other biographical and hagiographical works produced in the medieval and premodern Islamic world, the vitas studied for this book consist almost solely of first-hand accounts and self-testimonies transmitted by relatives, disciples, and intimate companions of the Sufi saints. The names of this first generation of informants and transmitters are given at the beginning of each citation attributed to them, and reappear in the texts.¹⁸ Throughout, the extracts in the vitas demonstrate the authors’ diligence in recording the accounts transmitted in oral and written forms. This effort is lucidly expressed by the author of the vita of ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī at the beginning of the work. Reflecting on his own reliability, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad remarked, “I trusted God while

16 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ‘Uthmān, *Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yunīnī*, composed AH 1157/1744. MS 259. H, No. 711 in Garrett Collection, Princeton University, Islamic Manuscripts Collection, fols. 26a–b.

17 On which, see Thierry Zarcone, “L’Hagiographie dans le monde turc,” in *Saints orientaux*, ed. Denise Aigle (Paris: De Boccard, 1995), 55–68.

18 See, for instance, the discussion of the development and structure of the first hagiographical corpora in medieval Morocco in Halima Ferhat and Hamid Triki, “Hagiographie et religion au Maroc médiéval,” *Hespéris Tamuda* 24 (1986): 17–51.

citing reliable books, and depended with full confidence on narratives trustworthy people relayed to me. May God forgive me for any mistake or inaccuracy.”¹⁹

The second observation is that the sacred biographies of Sufi saints were not written outside somehow “beyond time.” Rather, as this study seeks to demonstrate, the accounts preserved in them were anchored in their historical contexts and relate to concrete situations that lent them their meaning. Disciples and intimates elaborated on the lives of their shaykhs and the close relationships they forged with them, as well as their interaction with the surrounding society. For all their idealized descriptions and literary topoi, the accounts they relayed provide testimonies that shed light on the functions of the shaykhs as formidable masters and as embodiments of Islamic sainthood, as well as on the role of the narrators in nourishing and perpetuating their memoirs for later generations of local communities of devotees. Similarly, the memories, narratives, and histories that emplaced the holiness of the shaykhs in specific localities must have played a central role in revitalizing the sacredness of their burial places. Historical and anthropological studies that explore the relational aspects of hagiographical and historical traditions and the construction and signification of Sufi tombs and shrines are central to my approach of using the accounts in the *vitas* for the study of the sacralization of the space surrounding the medieval Sufi saints.²⁰

Building on insights gained from studying the lives of saints in medieval Latin Christendom, I read the hagiographical narratives of the Sufi Friends of God on their own terms and in their entirety rather than trying to distinguish those portions considered to be reliable from the rest.²¹ This holistic approach seems apt for Sufi biographical and bio-hagiographical literature, and especially for works devoted to individual holy lives that became common in the Near East and other parts of the Islamic world from around the thirteenth century onward. In addition to affording a wealth of information about the subject’s personal, public, and political life, they narrate the Sufi shaykh’s path to sainthood from youth to death and provide numerous examples of his saintly miracles.²²

19 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, *Kitāb Manāqib al-Shaykh ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīn*, fol. 2b.

20 These include Nile Green’s pathbreaking study on the relationship between the written and oral traditions attached to Sufi masters and the spatial territories in which they lived, traveled, and lie buried: Nile Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Devin DeWeese, “Sacred Places and Public Narratives: The Shrine of Aḥmad Yasavī in Hagiographical Traditions of the Yasavī Şūfī Order: 16th–17th Centuries,” *The Muslim World* 90 (2000): 353–76.

21 See especially Evelyn Patlagean, “Ancienne hagiographie byzantine et histoire sociale,” *Annales* esc. 23 (1968): 106–26; Stephen Wilson, ed., *Introduction to Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–2; and the annotated bibliography on this field, 309–417.

22 For an overview of the appearance and evolution of the Islamic bio-hagiographical genre, see John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5–7, 242–45. For more on the subject, see the biographical references in *Friends of God*, 318n15. On stories about saints’ miracles as a prominent component of Sufi biographies composed in Egypt and Syria from the Mamluk period onward, see

The miraculous, while never as dominant as in Christian and other religious traditions, might well have represented reality for those who recorded the narratives about the astonishing deeds of God's Friends, and therefore merited inclusion in their works.²³ In this respect, Spencer Trimingham describes the miracles of the Sufi saints (*karāmāt al-awliyā'*) as part of the transformation of Sufism in this period, "a blending of the saint-cult with the emerging Sufi orders and a new reverence for the Prophet's legacy."²⁴ Sufis who acquired honour were linked to all sorts of miracles—from outstanding perspectives on others' mental states, clairvoyance, and spiritual vision, through feats of healing, to more imaginative deeds like flying from Delhi to Mecca for a nightly pilgrimage and traversing long distances. Elaborate narratives of their miracles were effectively circulated by their disciples and companions and eventually put into writing.²⁵ Just how influential stories of saints performing miracles were may be gauged from the testimonies of their opponents.²⁶

Hagiographical narratives, particularly those linking the marvels of power and the manipulation of divine grace with defending the defenceless and benefiting the needy, must have reflected the concerns and expectations of the wider public of worshippers no less than the goals, worldviews, and traditions of those who related them and put them to writing. Moreover, only by situating the hagiographical narratives within a specific community of fellow believers could the memory of the heroic virtues and deeds of the Sufi saint be commemorated. His persona required concretization, and the manifestations of his spiritual power and grace required detailed depiction.²⁷ While the significance of hagiographical material for the history of Sufism has received

Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme*, 29–37. His study shows that such works could consist solely of stories about *karāmāt*. See also Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 18–20, on the dramatic expansion of the miracles of saints in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.

23 For insightful comparative perspectives, see Denise Aigle, ed., *Miracle et karāma: hagiographies médiévales comparées* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000).

24 Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 26–27.

25 For taxonomies of saintly miracles in studies that focus on particular historical and cultural contexts, see Cornell, *Realm*, 116; and Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Saint*, 129. For a more extensive treatment, see Richard Garmilich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes* (Weisbaden: Franz Steiner, 1987), 139–47; and Renard, *Friends of God*, 91–117.

26 For a recent in-depth study on the discourse on *karāmāt al-awliyā'* in Sunni Islam, beginning in the tenth century, see Jonathan A. C. Brown, "Faithful Dissenters: Sufi Skepticism about Miracles of Saints," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (2012): 123–68.

27 For the notion of persona and its performative character, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Press, 1959), 17–76; and Marcel Mauss, "La Notion de personne, celle de moi," in *Sociologie et Anthropologie*, 6th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 1995), 333–62. For charismatic performances in contemporary Sufi communities, see Paulo G. Pinto, "Performing *Baraka*: Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Syrian Sufism," in *On Archaeology of Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Islam: Past and Present Crossroads of Events and Ideas* (Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 5), ed. Georg Stauth (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004), 195–211.

ample scholarly attention, only recently have scholars started to situate the narratives about God's Friends in their particular milieus and uncover the political, social, and cultural worlds in which a gallery of figures, celebrated for their piety, moral conduct, and closeness to God operated.²⁸ This fresh avenue is advanced in the present study, which presents the Sufi saints as social actors who emerge from ever-evolving notions of sainthood that owe their meaning and normative force to their elaboration in specific cultural and historical contexts.

Complementary literary genres help to situate the hagiographical narratives in their temporal and spatial frame and to identify the burgeoning of physical places and sacred sites around the Sufi masters and God's Friends. These include historical works by contemporary and later Syrian historians, notably al-Nu'aymī (d. 951/1514) and Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 944/1548) for Damascus, and Ibn Shaddād (d. 684/1285) and Ibn al-'Adīm (d. 660/1262) for Aleppo and its environs, travellers' itineraries (the *riḥla* literary genre), and guides to places for pilgrimage in medieval Syria.²⁹ Especially significant in this regard is the sixteenth-century and earliest known guide to pilgrimage in Damascus and Syria, written by Ibn al-Hawrānī, *al-Ishārāt ilā amākin al-ziyārāt*. This text contains an impressive body of locally grounded hagiographical lore about the saints, whose names are used to identify particular sites. Websites and tourist guides to sanctuaries in contemporary Syria and Lebanon describe the sanctuaries that still stand.

By interrogating these literary sources, the book exposes the formation of a locally embedded charismatic religious leadership and the evolution of concrete and symbolic spheres of spiritual domination and sanctity in the historical setting under consideration. Such exposition may also advance an understanding of the embodiments and emplacements of Islamic sainthood and to contribute to current research on the relationship of Islamic hagiography to history.³⁰ The book relates to the realization of submission to the master's authority, the embodiment of the spiritual power that emanated from him in practices, objects, and places, as well as the hagiographical and historical traditions and means that ensured his centrality in the lives of his fellows and granted the space and site around him shape and meaning.

28 This methodological approach was developed and implemented in Rachida Chich and Denis Gril, eds., *Le Saint et son milieu: ou comment lire les sources hagiographiques* (Cairo: FAO, 2000), and in John Renard, ed., *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography in Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), a companion volume to his *Friends of God*.

29 On the appearance and development of the Syrian pilgrimage literature, see Meri, *The Cults of Saints*, 150–52; and see Janine Sourdel-Thomine's discussion of the *riḥla* genre and its contribution to the creation a map of pilgrimage places in medieval Damascus: Janine Sourdel-Thomine, "Les Anciens Lieux de pèlerinage damascaine d'après les sources arabes," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 14 (1952–54): 65–85.

30 For insightful reevaluations of hagiographical material as a source for history, see John J. Carry and Erik S. Ohlander, eds., *Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200–1800* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pt. 1: "Historiography."

Structure of the Book

The first part of this book centres on the performative character of spiritual power and its embodiments in symbolic practices and physical effects. Here, I adopt the approach, current in anthropological research, that reassesses the Weberian paradigm of charisma as a form of power embodied in the personality of its holder and arousing strong emotions and appeal.³¹ In this view, charisma is not only an inherent personal quality but also an interaction enacted between a particular leader and his following. In other words, charisma is a performative principle. The charismatic leader produces, displays, and enacts his extraordinary personal qualities within his community in relation to his fellowship and audience. Moreover, without a responsive audience, charisma remains an abstract idea: its existence is made possible only when a group is prepared to attribute exceptional qualities to one of its members. Charismatic figures who aspire to ensure recognition of their claims must enter into dialogue with their communities. The more such leaders display their virtues and spiritual power, the more attractive they are to the community.³² This approach may illuminate the construction and maintenance of spiritual power and grace that are condensed and signified by the Sufi concept of *baraka*. The Sufi shaykh asserted the divinely given spiritual power that set him apart from all other believers and attracted disciples and lay believers by displaying his knowledge and wisdom, outstanding virtues, and miracles. Moreover, even when “routinized” into institutional practices, organizational frameworks, and hereditary forms of succession, *baraka* retained its performative character.

Through the examination of hagiographical narratives preserved in the saintly *vitas*, the book engages in a microanalysis of the performances of spiritual and charismatic authority in Sufi congregations. First-hand testimonies by biological successors, disciples, and companions that circulated orally long before being recorded in literary form afford glimpses of the practices of spiritual guidance and the constitution and sustainment of a committed following. These include accounts of the investiture with the patched cloak or shawl (the *khirqā*) and the taking of the oath of fidelity (the *‘ahd*) that signified submission to the master’s authority and symbolized the personal binding relationship between master and disciple. Of special importance are narratives of masters supervising the conduct of their disciples, interpreting their visions, catering to their spiritual and mundane needs, and performing miraculous deeds to protect them in times of trouble. Such accounts reflect the practices at the heart of sustainment of their spiritual and charismatic authority and the formation of the group of committed disciples and companions. Equally meaningful are hagiographical narratives of masters

31 Presented in a number of papers and in Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1:trans. Gunther Roth and Clause Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

32 Recent discussions include Victoria Kennick and Arvind Sharma, eds., *Spiritual Masters of the World’s Religions* (Albany: SUNY, 2012), 8–15, and the chapters in Charles Lindholm, ed., *The Anthropology of Religious Charisma: Ecstasies and Institutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6–10.

transferring to their close companions the *baraka* embedded in their cloaks and other garments and in physical effects such as prayer rugs, rosaries, and coins that would remain with them after their death and make their figure present in their absence. At the same time, the saintly *vitae* are rich with narratives of the Sufi shaykhs disseminating their authority by displaying their saintly virtues and performing miracles within society in large.

According to the celebrated fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn, a saintly miracle (*karāma*) is a divine power that arouses the ability to exercise influence on others: “The worker of miracles is supported in his activity by the spirit of God. That is, miracles are performed by good persons and by souls that are entirely devoted to good deeds.”³³ Naturally, hagiographical narratives that display saintly miracles and marvels arose from a variety of motives and were designed to highlight varied functions of these “good and influential persons.” While their identification as Sufi shaykhs is common in medieval Islamic hagiographic literature, the reports about their heroic and beneficial deeds must have generated meaning for society at large and addressed the needs and expectations of fellow believers.³⁴ In the hagiographical narratives preserved in the *vitae* studied for this book, emphasis is placed on the application of lofty knowledge and manipulation of *baraka* to “command right and forbid wrong” (*al-amr bi-l-ma’rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) and to disseminate true religion as well as to protect fellow believers from enemies and oppressors, pursue justice, and benefit the needy. Narratives about the religious activism and moral performances of the revered shaykhs are often interwoven with attestations of their outstanding virtues and great piety, awe-inspiring appearance, arcane knowledge, and heroic marvels. Rooted in the particular historical and cultural contexts and containing considerable folkloristic images, the stories shed light on their interactions with the society around them and communal roles that might have otherwise remained hidden.

The second part of this book engages with the emplacements of spiritual power with a view to the theoretical frame of the “spatial turn” heralded by the philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Particularly important for my purpose is the concept of space not simply as a container or passive stage of social processes but as a product and producer of them.³⁵ Space is thus interpreted beyond physical boundaries and

33 ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. F. Rosenthal, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 3:167.

34 In this respect, Boaz Shoshan remarks that such reports reveal the ways by which Sufis in the medieval Islamic world solved problems, or, more precisely, were expected to solve problems: Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 20. For the tendency of saints’ miracles in medieval Christendom to address human needs, see Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Medieval Christendom, 1000–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 143–44.

35 Summing up the complex nature of space, Lefebvre writes “Space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but also producing and produced by them.” Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 286.

framed as a relational definition based on social constructs in the sense of perception, use, and appropriation. Seen from the perspective of religious and social history, this interpretation is central to the study of the interrelated dynamics with which this book is concerned: the construction and sustainment of spiritual and charismatic leadership and the rooting of holiness in the land. First, it shows how the development and proliferation of Sufi lodges furthered the concentration of authority in the hands of the masters who presided over them, and who manipulated their exclusive authority to sustain their domination. It was to the Sufi lodge, typically called *zāwiya*, which centred on a particular shaykh, that spiritual wayfarers came, to receive his guidance and be initiated into his spiritual path. There the Sufi master supervised their spiritual progress, ethics, and manners, set hierarchies, delineated the boundaries of affiliation with his congregation, and manifested his authority. As such, the lodge not only provided the shaykh and his group with a physical setting; it also came to play an essential role in the verification and regularization of his leadership status and in consolidating a committed congregation around him. With shaykhs typically buried in their lodges and with biological and spiritual descendants concentrating around their shaykhs' gravesites and buried by their sides, this dynamic continued long after their death.

Concurrently, Sufi lodges and saintly tombs were places where Sufi congregations and other social groups interacted. Their actual experience and symbolic use by wide circles of followers and admirers—visits to them, supplication and ritual activities that took place there, and architectural patronage by members of the ruling and urban elites and other wealthy patrons—heightened and revitalized their centrality in the life of local communities.³⁶ Hence, the spaces that localized and gave materiality to the presence of the saint, serving as arenas of his *baraka*, evolved as focuses of spheres of spiritual domination and sanctity, central to the expression of religious authority, piety, and the belief in the miraculous.³⁷ The expression “saintly spheres” was coined as a key research tool in analyzing this process.

36 Catherine Bell was the first to pave the way for the understanding of the role of rituals in the creation and heightening of the space in which it they take place. She formulated her theory on ritualization in two books: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* and *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. In this respect, Jonathan Z. Smith contends that a place is made meaningful due to the devotional activity that takes place there: J. Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 103. Drawing on Smith, Kim Knott argues “Sacred space is ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary”: Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2005), 96. See also Claudia Moser and Cecelia Feldman, *Locating the Sacred: Theoretical Approaches to the Emplacement of Religion*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014), for a recent collective work that advances the study of the emplacement of religious devotion and the sacralization of space.

37 For a study that makes an important contribution to our understanding of the formation of a material space of religious belief and practice, see Martin Rademacher, “Space, Religion, and Bodies: Aspects of Concrete Emplacements of Religious Practice,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 9 (2016): 302–24. Taking up the implications of the “spatial turn” in the wider context of a “material turn,” Rademacher highlights the significance of the material space of religious practice for shaping and facilitating discourse and embodiments of human actors in space.

Analysis of a range of the narratives serves to reconstruct the dynamic through which Sufi shaykhs and Friends of God were embedded in particular environments and their holiness imprinted on the land. Funerary and burial narratives, lodge and tombs foundation accounts, and hagiographical narratives that extolled the extraordinary traits and miraculous deeds of the Sufi saints who resided in them and who were interred (or believed to be buried) there strengthened their affinity to local communities and to the land.³⁸ Historical and geographical accounts indicated the locations of the lodges and gravesites and bound the saintly figures to the local and regional history and sacred topography. Travellers' literature and pilgrimage guides pinpointed the places steeped with divine grace and situated the gravesites of the venerated shaykhs in a kind of a regional map of sacred places in medieval Syria.³⁹ The emplacement of the models of piety and virtue within their concrete milieu and the recording of the formation and spread of spaces and sites around them could have also served to convey the splendour and sacredness of the physical environs.⁴⁰

Reflecting contemporary beliefs and practices and moulded by those who related, transmitted, and recorded them, the narratives translated and analyzed for this book shed light on the creation of concrete and symbolic saintly spheres that had an abiding impact on the religious and geographical landscapes of Syrian cities and their surroundings.

38 This is what Stephennie Mulder eloquently refers to as “a landscape of deeds” that recorded the actions of holy and saintly figures, and the rituals of those who revered them. See Stephennie Mulder, *The Shrines of the 'Alids in Medieval Syria: Sunnis, Shi'is and the Architecture of Coexistence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 13.

39 In this regard, Dorothea French notes the insightful contribution made by Christian travelers and topographers to mapping sacred landscapes in Roman Palestine. See Dorothea French, “Mapping Sacred Spaces: Pilgrimage and the Creation of Christian Topographies in Roman Palestine,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum Ergänzungsband* 20 (1995): 792–97. Her observations were adopted by Joseph Meri in his discussion of the mapping of sacred landscapes by Jews and Muslims in medieval Syria: Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 12ff.

40 For a study that explores narratives of locality in the field of Islamic history, see Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Entangled with topographical and geographical histories, literary anthologies, religious treatises, travel literature, and maps, the notion of “place” in the early Islamic world is perceived by the author as an inventory system that arouses a sense of belonging and an aura of sacredness.

