

**Muhammad's Grave: Death Rites and the Making of Islamic Society.** Leor Halevi.  
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We know comparatively little about the burial customs of the early Muslim world, in contrast to the cultures of the ancient Near East and Egypt. The paucity of precious grave goods to be exhumed from Muslim burials, as well as a virtual moratorium on excavating inhumations of individuals who are believed to have been Muslims, has contributed in large part to the lack of scholarly attention. In this respect, Leor Halevi's monograph is a welcome contribution. It is an exhaustively researched study based on more than a decade of careful investigation of textual sources and material culture. Yet, *Muhammad's Grave* does more than fill in a gap. It engages in a number of important ongoing debates about the nature of early Islamic historiography, the treatment of ritual, and, most importantly, the place of death in understanding the cultural transformations of the Islamic world in its formative stage.

At its core this is a study of the emerging discourses of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the science of Prophetic traditions (*'ilm al-hadith*) as they pertained to the treatment of death in early Muslim societies, primarily in the cities of Arabia, Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia. The study analyzes how these discourses sought to "Islamize the body" through manufacturing a standard idiom for the ways in which Muslims should bury, mourn, and conceptualize their dead. While this approach has the benefit of transforming death and its customs into a valuable site in which to examine a series of larger issues ranging from the contestations of political authority to the institutionalization of patriarchy, it offers an oversimplified understanding of the relationship between

discourse and practice in the Islamic tradition. Throughout the book, early Muslim scholars (*ahl al-‘ilm*)—otherwise termed in the study as “traditionists,” “pietists,” or more severely “ideologues”—stand as a constant force of homogenization, despite their many disagreements. The static nature of these opinions stand in contrast with more dynamic practices of the rest of society, as revealed in a material record of shrouds, tombstones, and funeral biers, as well as various textual references to wailing, to the purchase of such funerary goods, or to descriptions of the funeral processions.

For Halevi, the effect of this pietist discourse is to tame this dynamism particularly among those sectors of the society that were not effective in producing that discourse: namely, women and various nonelites. He argues that the ideological triumph of the homogenizing forces of the traditionist scholars becomes reflected in our own readiness to categorize deviations in practice from the discursive norm as “non-Islamic” (p. 196). Such an argument is problematic, however, in that it assumes, and indeed reifies, a long-standing Orientalist trope of establishing a dichotomy between a presumed correct, orthodox Islam and the many popular, heterodox “islams.” In doing so Halevi has failed to address more recent anthropological theorizations of argumentation within an Islamic discursive tradition following Talal Asad’s forceful critique, in *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (1986), of that orthodox–heterodox division in the work of Clifford Geertz, Ernest André Gellner, and others.

An attempt is made to nuance the problems of this dichotomization by the author’s argument that legal norms stand in a complex relationship to underling practices whose opposition or acceptance must be negotiated, at least initially. Where this book succeeds most convincingly is in teasing apart those negotiations and what they reveal

about the societies of the early Muslim world. For instance, the discussion of funeral processions and how they should be led juxtaposed to the history of who actually took responsibility for their execution offers a clear lens onto the workings of political authority and the relationship between state actors, scholars, and the general populace. Ultimately, the narrative with which we are presented is one in which Islamic legal discourse attempts to resolve various sources of social tension (class, gender, sectarianism, political loyalties, etc.) that manifest themselves in elements of the death ritual—types of shrouds, the cost of burial, performance of grief, and even understandings of life in the grave—through the imposition of a normative standard.

The richness of this study, however, is done a disservice by an epilogue that suggests that the production of patriarchy is the dominant result of these efforts to tackle social divisions through a normative death ritual. While these rites are certainly tied to the organization of gender roles (and not “sex” as the author erroneously writes in places), the book largely ignores the vast literature and debates about patriarchy in Muslim societies. The assertion that the Islamization of death rites entailed the rise of Muslim patriarchs therefore stands as a somewhat hollow, trotting out a well-worn trope for the study of the Middle East amongst an otherwise sophisticated treatment of the social implication of death and burial practices.

Ultimately, this self-described secular, historical interpretation of religious acts and thoughts (p. 3) makes important strides in demonstrating the potential for bringing together various strands of textual and material data for the analysis of a cultural transformation during the early Islamic period. However, one must ask whether the book misses the opportunity to address important issues that have persisted in contemporary

Middle Eastern politics about the secular treatment of sacred histories. The author could have offered a more full articulation about both the intellectual value and political consequences of engaging in what many devout practitioners might consider to be controversial scholarship. Unfortunately, simply retitling the book “Rites for the Dead: Funerals and the Afterlife in Early Islam” for publication in the Middle East does little to adequately address such concerns.

#### REFERENCE CITED

Asad, Talal

1986 The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam. Georgetown: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies.