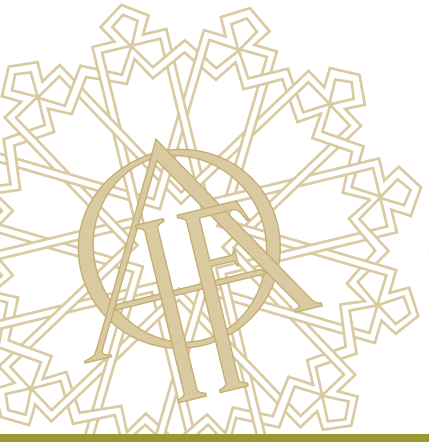
MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION NATIONALE, DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR ET DE LA RECHERCHE



ANNALES ISLAMOLOGIQUES

en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne en ligne

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144

Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh

# The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries

*Conditions d'utilisation*

L'utilisation du contenu de ce site est limitée à un usage personnel et non commercial. Toute autre utilisation du site et de son contenu est soumise à une autorisation préalable de l'éditeur (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). Le copyright est conservé par l'éditeur (Ifao).

*Conditions of Use*

You may use content in this website only for your personal, noncommercial use. Any further use of this website and its content is forbidden, unless you have obtained prior permission from the publisher (contact AT ifao.egnet.net). The copyright is retained by the publisher (Ifao).

**Dernières publications**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 9782724711264 | *La chapelle d'Osiris Ounnefer Neb-djefaou* | Laurent Coulon |
| 9782724711752 | *Guide du Caire Islamique* | Hadrien Collet |
| 9782724711660 | *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales 41* | Adrien Candiard (éd.) |
| 9782724711745 | *Bulletin archéologique des Écoles françaises à l'étranger (BAEFE)* | |
| 9782724711271 | *Du côté de chez Zeus* | Emmanuel Botte (éd.), Hélène Cuvigny (éd.), Michel Reddé (éd.) |
| 9782724711677 | *La Description de l'Égypte* | Paul-Marie Grinevald |
| 9782724711714 | *La pensée et la pratique pharmacologiques d'Avicenne* | Sylvie Ayari |
| 9782724711899 | *BCAI 40* | |

© Institut français d'archéologie orientale - Le Caire

HEGHNAR ZEITLIAN WATENPAUGH

# The City's Edge

## Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries

Cities, especially capital cities, and monumental architecture often shoulder the primary burden of expressing the power of the state. This is nowhere more apparent than in the age of the sultanates, where architectural projects, prominently situated and innovatively designed, became an obligatory vehicle for the representation of sultanic power. However, urban development and expansion can also represent power and prosperity, albeit in a less focalized manner. Their design and implementation is often the result of protracted negotiations involving many kinds of social actors. This essay examines a case of urban development whose direction was not primarily determined by state authorities, but which nonetheless became a key site for the staging of their power. This essay focuses on the periphery as a particular problem in urban history, using the example of early Ottoman Aleppo.

Limits and edges are one of the most intriguing components of an early modern city. Urban thresholds, the entry points into cities, are often spaces where the transition from without to within acquires a ritualized quality enhanced by architectural events, featuring monumental inscriptions, insignia, guards, gates that can be shut, temporary marketplaces and numerous permanent and impermanent devices. At the same time, especially during periods of urban development, the boundary of the city can be in flux—suburbs arise and gain on the surrounding countryside, or by contrast, peripheral areas become obsolete or abandoned. The movement of the urban boundary has both formal and informal aspects. The urban limit also has a fiscal and juridical significance: it is the point at which trade goods are taxed, where municipal legal jurisdiction begins and ends, and where religious requirements may alter.



AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

The integration of the great cities of the Mamluk empire into the Ottoman state in the early sixteenth century led to tremendous urban and commercial development. In the Levant, this development included an expansion of urban space through suburbs whose shape and morphology markedly differ from the intramural cities which retained aspects of their Roman-era street structure. Rather than the laws of antique urban development, the form of these suburbs often followed the constraints of the natural topography or the opportunities provided by trade routes. For example, the suburb of Midan in Damascus stretches along the road leading to that ancient city's Southwest.

This urban development prompts a number of questions. First: how can it be documented for periods in which we have little cartographic evidence? Second: what are the mechanisms that determine growth and the displacement of the urban edge? Third: how does the presence of newly urbanized segments change the organization of space and its perception in the city as a whole?

This essay considers the question of the boundary of the city in the case of early Ottoman Aleppo (16th-17th century). In this period of tremendous urban growth, the edge of the city was transformed through the creation of new suburbs. This essay considers the resources available to understand the movement of the urban edge, including the study of architectural remains, juridical literature that legislates the limits of the city, as well as narrative sources produced by urban dwellers. These sources each produce different kinds of knowledge about the city, making some aspects of urban transformation better understood than others. This essay addresses the specific kinds of information that can be gleaned from these sources, and it considers how such sources have been used by scholars in the past and to what effect. Moreover, this essay suggests that an original contribution to urban history can be made through a careful utilization of the biographies of saints, a rich resource not often considered for the study of space.

## The Jurist's Vision

Juridical literature constitutes an important source for urban history. Juridical literature consists of many forms of codified writings, some of which report oral arguments (as in the case of court records), or respond to a question (as in *fatwa*-s, or legal opinions). In so far as they recall an oral exchange, these forms of writing preserve something of an oral narration, one "that ceaselessly labors to compose spaces, to verify, confront and displace their boundaries," as Michel de Certeau argued for juridical writing in a different historical context.[1]

Scholars of the Ottoman period have taken advantage of the relative preservation of court records to reconstruct a sense of space, a sense of social propriety within the space, as well as

1. De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*, p. 181.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

disputes over space.[2] As rich a source as court records are, however, they rarely focus primarily on issues of space with the kind of dense discussion valuable to the urban historian.

In addition to court records, *fatwa*-s and other works of jurisprudence provide a critical source for the study of the city and its limits. In a series of articles, Baber Johansen mined the writings of Hanafi jurists to distil their concept of the city, and in particular the terminology they used to demarcate the city limits.[3] Johansen was responding to the broader 20th century debate on the Islamic city, and countering some of the prevalent assumptions within that debate, namely, that Islamic law does not clearly define the city, and that it does not recognize corporate municipal urban institutions. Johansen's work showed that Hanafi legal thinking in fact did differentiate between the city and the countryside, and moreover, between different lifestyles: urban, agricultural and pastoralist.[4]

One juridical debate focused on defining urban boundaries. Crucially, the concern over the limits of the city did not arise in the context of a theoretical discussion of the city, but rather in response to questions regarding the differing ritual obligations for Hanafi Muslims inside and outside an urban center. The question at hand required a clear demarcation between the city and its surroundings. In that debate, Hanafi jurists struggled to define urban boundaries in practical terms, as for a traveler setting out from the city who needs to know when he has crossed the outer boundary of the town in order to shorten his prayers in accordance with Hanafi law. This discursive context dictated that the jurists take into account not only the requirements of the law, but also the physical layout of cities in their own time, as experienced by the individual (as opposed to the city as conceptualized by the mapmaker, for example). For the Hanafi jurist, this constituted a process of legal reasoning based on precedents and legal theory which would result in a prescriptive legal opinion that might or might not be implemented in the future, but was sustained nonetheless by a practical consideration of facts on the ground.[5]

Johansen's work showed that by the Ottoman period, for jurists writing in Arabic, the city ramparts played no role in demarcating the city from its surroundings.[6] They were probably responding to the fact that by then, most cities in the Levant had expanded greatly beyond their curtain walls. Thus the jurists had to take into consideration spatial entities beyond the intramural city such as suburbs, villages dependent on the urban center, and orchards supplying the city. Johansen showed that the Hanafi jurists developed the concept of the *finā' al-miṣr*, which he translates as the "urban precinct." The term *finā'* denotes the open space

**2.** The following recent studies use such records, however they do not primarily focus on spatial issues. Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity*; Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine*; Grehan, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus*.

**3.** Johansen, "Amwal Zahira and Amwal Batina," p. 247-263; *id.*, "The All-Embracing Town and its Mosques," p. 139-161; *id.*, "Urban Structures in the View of Muslim Jurists," p. 94-100.

**4.** Johansen, "Amwal Zahira," p. 263.

**5.** As demonstrated in Ibn 'Abidin, translated in Johansen, "Urban Structures."

**6.** Urban ramparts played an important role in the arguments presented by other madhhabs. Johansen, "All-Embracing Town," p. 146.


© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

surrounding a house, or a village, reserved for use by its inhabitants. As applied to the city, the *finā' al-miṣr* is contrasted to the *ʿumrān al-miṣr*, "the permanently inhabited, built-up area of the town." *finā' al-miṣr* is an open area featuring no or few constructions, that serves the common interests of the urban community, such as sites for public prayer, cemeteries, grounds for horse-races, military parades, polo games, and for the lodging of pilgrims.[7] Orchards beyond the walls that supplied produce to cities, or lands used for agricultural exploitation did not form part of the *finā'*, but rather were considered to be an entity that separated the town from its urban precinct.[8]

The Ottoman Hanafi jurists did not conceive of the *finā'* as a continuous band. Rather, often using the plural term (*afniyat al-miṣr*) they emphasized the discontinuous nature of the urban periphery.[9] Indeed, as Ottoman-period cities expanded unevenly, the jurists responded by evolving a more flexible notion of the urban boundary.[10] Ottoman-period Hanafi jurists' definition of the *finā'* stressed functional needs, rather than fixed distances as in the arguments used in earlier historical periods.

The concept of the *finā'* enabled the jurists to conceive of a buffer zone between town and countryside, "not as one of strict limits and ruptures but as one of gradual transition from one to the other."[11] Beyond the *finā'* lay the realm of the non-urban, with its own legal status as far as religious obligations, like the Friday prayer, were concerned. Another terminology denoted this space: words like the *sawadd*, the *mafāza*, among others.[12]

This juridical literature is important because it sheds light on a broader concept of the city—one not limited to architecture (*ʿumrān al-miṣr* more or less corresponds to our modern concept of architecture). Early modern cities have always been surrounded by an area of land that has been ambiguous—a "fringe belt" given over to activities dependent on the city, but excluded from the urban core.[13] The Hanafi discussion summarized above makes that explicit in ways other kinds of sources do not. It makes explicit the uneven nature of the urban periphery—the *finā'* did not surround the city evenly on all sides. It clarifies, finally, the appreciation of and the terminology developed for different kinds of spatial entities and functions at the limits of the city—orchards, cemeteries, etc. Johansen's work shows us that the juridical debates were lively—jurists debated terms and concepts and their applications. Different periods had different concerns–as witnessed by the greater importance of the urban periphery in Hanafi debates of the Ottoman period.

It is worth noting, however, that the particular nature of the juridical texts analyzed by Johansen–particularly their prescriptive intent, and their tendency to craft responses to specific practical questions—do not make them reliable sources for recovering how spatial boundaries

7. Johansen, "All-Embracing Town," p. 146.
8. Johansen, "Urban Structures," note 3.
9. Johansen, "All-Embracing Town," p. 148.
10. Johansen, "Urban Structures," p. 96.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
12. Johansen, "Urban Structures," p. 95.
13. Kostof, *The City Assembled*, Chapter 1.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

were experienced. Other kinds of sources provide evidence that is difficult to collate with the juridical view. For example, at what point on the urban periphery did the taxation of goods entering the city take place? How did that point mesh with the jurists' definition of the urban precinct? It is not always possible to obtain specific answers. For example, a European merchant traveling to Aleppo from Baghdad narrated that the caravan of which he was a part stopped at a village about half a day's journey from their destination. Customs officials from Aleppo arrived to examine the caravan's products and assess the tax due. The transaction complete, the caravan headed towards the city.[14] Can one assume that the village was part of the *fināʾ al-miṣr*, or was it a dependency? Unfortunately the discourse of the merchant and that of the jurist do not converge.

## A Snapshot of Aleppo at The End of the 16th Century

In the second half of the 16th century, Aleppo was the Ottoman empire's third greatest city and its commercial capital.[15] Aleppo thrived under the first century of Ottoman rule, capitalizing on its connections to the caravan routes that stretched East towards Baghdad and beyond, as well as to the network of Mediterranean ports to its West. Aleppo was a crossroads for diverse people and commodities. It was a place where many distinct religious practices thrived—Muslim and non-Muslim, elite institutions and popular devotions.

To the long-distance merchant arriving by land, the cityscape of Aleppo offered the stark contrast of a fortified natural hill (the citadel) and a settlement on the flatland between this hill and the small river Quwayq. Aleppo is an ancient city where history has accumulated in layers. Its urban core retains a Roman-era grid plan. Successive Islamic dynasties endowed it with monuments, including its distinctive citadel, and supported its holy sites related to such figures as Abraham, Zachariah, the early Shiʿite imams, and others revered in the Islamic tradition.

In the second half of the 16th century, Ottoman imperial patrons transformed Aleppo by endowing large institutional complexes in the central economic district, turning it into a monumental corridor. The new mosques introduced the iconic Ottoman style with a central hemispherical dome, pencil-shaped minaret, and porticoes. The emblematic style that Sinan perfected[16] was both recognizable and distinct from the idiom of past and contemporary Muslim dynasties. Through a self-conscious and centralized process, versions of this mosque type along with the urban institutions it supported, were replicated in every city that came under Ottoman control.

**14.** Rousseau, *Voyage de Bagdad à Alep*, p. 164.
**15.** In this period Aleppo ranked third behind Istanbul and Cairo. For a general sense of urban development see Sauvaget, *Alep*. For developments in the Ottoman period see Raymond, *Grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane*; Watenpaugh, *The Image of an Ottoman City*.
**16.** Necipoglu, *The Age of Sinan*.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Ottoman patrons invested in Aleppo's economic potential by endowing commercial institutions to benefit their mosques—such as caravanserais, workshops, and markets. These structures bolstered Aleppo's status as a dynamic center of the East-West trade, the city where spices and silks from India and Iran were exchanged for English broadcloth and New World silver in one of the world's largest covered bazaars. Collectively, through their form and urban functions, the institutional complexes remade Aleppo in the image of an Ottoman city, linking it to similarly endowed cities throughout the empire. This architectural process was so effective that Aleppo bears the imprint of empire more than any other provincial Ottoman town.

The central commercial district functioned as a city within a city, a space of uncommon openness, a place of encounter, where religious communities and diverse social strata interacted with locals and foreigners. It contrasted with the customary discretion of most urban neighborhoods, with their strong social identity and self-contained economies.

The city was inscribed within its ramparts and its curtain wall with monumental gates, repaired by successive dynasties that added their emblems to these access points into the city.[17] The periphery beyond the walls had developed unevenly as early as the medieval period, forming neighborhoods with distinct reputations and histories. They will be introduced briefly as they appear, counterclockwise, from the Northwest of the walled city. The Northwestern neighborhoods, which housed the Christian institutions of the city, begin to be mentioned in the chronicles in the 15th century, though they had probably developed earlier.[18] To the West, beyond Antioch Gate that linked Aleppo to its Mediterrranean port, tanneries established around 1574 near the river Quwayq to shelter the urban core from their noxious emissions became the focus of a neighborhood.

About two kilometers outside of Bab Antakiyya, on the slopes of Jabal Jawshan, were located two shrines devoted to the *ahl al-bayt*.[19] This very early development—the shrines were erected in the late 12th and the early 13th centuries–seemingly did not attract extensive urbanization, even though it served as a focus of pilgrimage and yearly commemorations. Aleppine topographers seem to include them in their discussions of the nearest suburban neighborhood, Kallasa, to the southwest of the old city.[20]

Outside Bab Qinnesrin, a site constraint prevented urban expansion. The sparsely populated southern quarters capitalized on their proximity to the Salihin cemetery and its pilgrimage spots. The Eastern edge of the city mediated between city dwellers and Bedouin traders who specialized in crafts related to the caravan trade.[21] Here a large open space served as the camel market.

**17.** For the medieval history of the ramparts see Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo*, p. 19.

**18.** David, "L'espace des chrétiens à Alep," p. 150-170.

**19.** Tabbaa, *Constructions of Power*; Sauvaget, "Deux sanctuaires chiites d'Alep," p. 224-237, 319-327.

**20.** Al-Ġāzī includes them in his discussion of Kallasa, along with some other semi-rural pilgrimage sites, Al-Ġāzī, *Kitāb nahr*, vol. 2, p. 211-214.

**21.** Sauvaget, *Alep*, p. 228-231; Hivernel, "Bab al-Nayrab," p. 215-238; Gangler and Gaube, "A Quarter of Aleppo in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," p. 159-168; Gangler, *Ein traditionelles Wohnviertel*.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

To the center and northeast, however, urban development had a sketchier history. This cluster developed in a linear manner around roads that emerged from the two main gates in this area.[22] The initial medieval developments here were almost completely destroyed in the Mongol invasion of 1260 and never really recovered. Consequently, this area attracted very little elite patronage and had few urban services. In the late 16th century, it was one of the least prestigious areas of the city. It was covered in ruins—dilapidated, unused structures. Its inhabitants during the first two Ottoman centuries were primarily Muslim immigrants from the countryside, some squatters, mainly of Turkic and Kurdish origins—as opposed to the Arab origins of most of the elite city dwellers. Unlike the manicured orchards to the Northwest of the city, where one went out for picnics, this northeastern part of Aleppo was surrounded by decayed cemeteries that housed the forgotten dead (by contrast, the prestigious cemetery of Salihin lay to the South of the city, featuring well maintained shrines and pilgrimage destinations). Here, one feared thieves or wild dogs. Thus this part of the city was peripheral both physically and socially. This area was sparsely urbanized until the early 17th century.

Aleppo's periphery in the early Ottoman period bears out the character of the urban precinct as discussed by Hanafi jurists, in so far as it was spatially uneven, and historically heterogeneous. Some of the suburbs responded to functional needs of the urban core (the tanneries), others seem to have responded to communal politics (the primarily Christian northwest, and the area devoted to the *ahl al-bayt*), or to ethnic-geographic solidarities (the eastern districts). The unevenness extends to the types of sources available for the study of the periphery. As Jacques Hivernel observed in his ethnography of Bab al-Nayrab and surroundings, this critical area that mediated between the tribal and the urban maintained a primarily oral memory, complicating the writing of its history in the early modern period.

## Documenting Urban Growth

One of the challenges of writing the history of urbanism in Islamic societies is the great paucity of "accurate" visual information for early modern cities in the shape of maps, or views. As André Raymond has observed, until the 18th century, when "accurate" views of Middle Eastern cities began to be drawn up by (primarily western) scholars, two kinds of visual evidence exist.[23] On the one hand, are images of cities in Islamic manuscripts, particularly in the Ottoman period.[24] These hold tremendous value for the understanding of cities but yield decidedly little concrete information along the lines of measurements, street patterns, building types and demography. On the other hand, are some casual or superficial views of the city by western travelers which, similarly, reveal more about the observer's relationship to the observed than any "facts" that can allow the urban historian today to reconstruct cities.[25]

22. David, "Urbanisation spontanée et planification," p. 14-17.
23. Raymond, "Cartographie et histoire des villes arabes," p. 22-31.
24. See a discussion of a 1537 image of Aleppo, and bibliography, in Watenpaugh, *Aleppo*, Chapter 6.
25. David, "Le plan d'Alep du consul Rousseau," p. 151-160.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Historians of Islamic cities in the Ottoman period have relied on certain kinds of documentary sources, including *waqfiyya*-s (endowment deeds) that provide a wealth of concrete information on some aspects of the built environment while they are silent on others. In addition, by their nature, *waqfiyya*-s are often prescriptive rather than descriptive. They focus on specific endowments, specific buildings, not on urban segments or neighborhoods.

To address the problems of sources in Ottoman urbanism, scholars have proposed other methods for measuring urban growth. Some scholars have relied on systematic analyses of neighborhoods and their architectural remains. The extensive surveys of Jean-Claude David, Heinz Gaube and Eugen Wirth, and Anette Gangler have been instrumental in forming a basis of knowledge about urban development and the evolution of architectural forms.[26] Not surprisingly, in inhabited neighborhoods, the majority of the extant fabric dates to the 19th and 20th centuries. Without archaeology, earlier periods of urban development are difficult to measure. For example, Heinz and Gangler's survey of buildings in the neighborhood to the East of Bāb al-Ḥadīd yielded only one surviving house from the 16th century.[27] In other words, the remains visible today do not reveal the full extent of this peripheral suburb's development in earlier periods.

André Raymond developed a method where he systematically documented the location and displacement of specific urban functions that are almost always associated with the urban periphery. In a classic article, Raymond tracked changes in the location of tanneries in several Ottoman-period Arab cities, which he then interpreted as an indicator of the shift in the location of the urban periphery.[28] In his study of tanneries in Ottoman provincial cities, André Raymond observed that they were generally located at the edge of urban areas. Tanneries required the proximity of slaughterhouses that supplied them with animal skins, and of a water source; they required open spaces to dry skins and created noxious odors. Given the necessity to be located on the periphery, Raymond argued, the relocation of a tannery was an "urban sign" that indicated the expansion of the city limits.[29] He and other scholars used a similar method to track changes in patterns of locations of marketplaces, public baths, fountains, coffeehouses and other "urban equipments" as indicators of change in urban activities and growth.[30]

Raymond emphasized the importance of such "concrete" evidence for the study of early modern Ottoman cities in the absence of statistical data. This method is extremely useful because it allows one to gain reliable and quantitative information about specific urban functions—which was one of Raymond's goals. This method enables one to track urban change. However, the relocation of the tanneries allows us to see a picture of the shift in the city's edge after it has already occurred. This is both the advantage and disadvantage of this method, since it gives us little sense of the process that led to this new periphery. Were there

**26.** See for example, David *et al.*, *La Suwayqat 'Ali à Alep*; Gaube and Wirth, *Aleppo*; Gangler, *Ein traditionelles Wohnviertel*.

**27.** Gangler and Gaube, "A Quarter of Aleppo."

**28.** Raymond, "Le déplacement des tanneries," p. 192-200.

**29.** *Ibid.*, p. 192.

**30.** For discussion of public baths as "urban signs"; Raymond, "Signes urbains," p. 183-193; *id.*, "Les fontaines publiques," p. 235-291; a similar method is used in Denoix *et al.* (eds.), *Le Khan al-Khalili et ses environs*.


© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

demographic or economic pressures? Was there a struggle over space? Was it fraught? Was it peaceful? Did it involve negotiation between groups, interests? What was there before, how did it change, what was displaced?

Raymond's method relies upon remains on the ground and documentary evidence. However, some urban edges cannot be easily documented in this manner. In Aleppo for example, information about the suburb outside Bāb al-Nayrab, the meeting point of the urban and the desert, is derived mostly from oral sources that cannot be easily recovered. Western travelers did not venture there. Historical sources written by *ʿulamā'* rarely discuss it. It has and likely will remain blank for the early modern period, though ethnography has elucidated its current role in the city.

## Narratives of the Periphery

The genres of the historical topography and the biographical dictionary constitute another type of locally produced sources, ones that can provide a sense of the experience of space on the ground. Ottoman historiography over the course of the twentieth century privileged archival sources, whereas the late twentieth century has seen an increasing interest in narrative texts as a source for social and intellectual history.[31] Among the narrative texts, biographical dictionaries are rarely used for the study of the history of space.[32] In this section I outline how biographical dictionaries can be employed as a unique source for urban history.

The genre of the biographical dictionary compiles the lives of important persons related to a given city. The biographies can provide a window on the use and perception of urban spaces, complemented by sources such as chronicles, endowment deeds and archival documents. The biographical dictionaries often discussed the city and architecture, however they contain little information that is specifically visual. Thus the historian must find ways to mine the texts for information if not on architecture, then on the early modern perception of space.[33]

Specifically, one can acquire a sense of the development of the urban periphery in the northeastern suburbs of Aleppo in the late 16th and early 17th centuries through biographies of a saint, Šayḫ Abū Bakr, who elected to live in the wilderness at the edge of the city and whose tomb was later transformed into a dervish lodge. Šayḫ Abū Bakr ibn Abī al-Wafā' (1503-1583) was a personage emblematic of early modern antinomian piety. He was a majdhub (enraptured by God), a category of Muslim saints, or Friends of God. The most respectable Aleppine *ʿulamā'* from the mid-16th to the early 20th century wrote biographies of Abu Bakr. In analyzing these biographies, my goal is not to ascertain the facts of his life but rather to trace the fluctuation of the saint's image and his relationship to space, keeping in mind that representations of a mystical subject are codified productions that relate to a broader cultural field.

31. Kafadar, "Self and Others," p. 122-123; Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy*, Chapter 2.
32. Cooperson, "Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative," p. 99-113.
33. For a discussion of such texts produced in Aleppo, see Watenpaugh, *Aleppo*, Chapter 6. For a model of the use of such sources for the study of space, see Watenpaugh, "Deviant Dervishes," p. 535-565.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

The unconventional, often offensive behavior of the enraptured ones was taken as a sign of their closeness to God's truth, their ability to see hidden things and bestow baraka or blessing. Among the many kinds of saints Islamic society recognized were certain exceptional individuals who flaunted their rejection of social norms, and called attention to their constructed and arbitrary nature. These saints were revered in their lifetime, subsisting on charity. Their graves became sites of popular devotion tended by dervishes. Their seemingly insane behavior fell into recognizable patterns of religious performance in urban Islam. During his lifetime, Abu Bakr attracted a retinue of dervishes, who were not themselves saints, but imitated the saint by following an excessive repertoire of transgression.

As I have discussed elsewhere, the biographies of Šayḫ Abū Bakr catalogued his acts of renunciation, his eccentricities, and his challenges to authority. A careful examination of his reported actions, once mapped onto the city, also reveal the saint's particular relationship to space. From the moment he was attracted by God, Abū Bakr left the city to squat at its Northeastern edge, three miles from the ramparts, in an abandoned cemetery on the slopes of a mound known as al-Ǧabal al-Awsaṭ ("Middle Hill"). He lived in the wilderness at the city's edge, he rejected conventional domesticity, surrounded by the dervishes who gravitated towards him. The dervish community staged an inverted version of domesticity at the edge of the city. Rather than the living, the dervishes cohabited with the dead in cemeteries; instead of extended biological families and retainers, they adopted a homosocial grouping of unrelated men.

The next step in this method consists in relating the mystical subjectivity of the saint to his practice of space, by mapping his activities onto the city and surrounding landscape. The wilderness at the edge of the city was a key spatial category: it marked the boundary of civilization. At this precise location lived the saint. In the biographies, architecture and the city are allied with normative Islam and the institutionalized Sufi brotherhoods; the wilderness is associated with ruins, desolation and antinomian piety. Both spatial categories seemed to perform critical religious and social roles. While they were opposites, they were in constant interaction. When one maps Abū Bakr's movements in and out of the city, it appears that he enacted an alternative mystical geography. He avoided the well-known venerable Muslim shrines of the city, where his biographers spent their time. Instead he favored an idiosyncratic list of non-dominant mystical sites.

Abū Bakr also interacted with the urban core in ritualized events. One biographer disapprovingly stated that the saint frequented the coffeehouse of Aslan Dada to listen to music.[34] This café was located in the central covered market. If in sixteenth-century Aleppo as elsewhere in the Ottoman empire, coffeehouses had become ubiquitous public spaces, nonetheless they were not considered entirely respectable. Indeed, the narrative context of this anecdote is pejorative: visiting the coffeehouse at night and listening to music are presented as not respectable. By contrast, Abū Bakr is never reported as visiting the most important religious site of the old city, the Great Mosque of Aleppo, located a five-minute walk from

34. Abū al-Wafāʾ al-ʿUrdī, *Maʿādin al-ḏahab*, p. 47. See a more extended discussion in Watenpaugh, "Deviant Dervishes."


© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

the café. For Abu Bakr, then, this incursion into the city to partake of a risqué activity may have signaled his partiality for an unconventional mystical urban geography.

While the biographies appear to be repetitive and formulaic, in fact, over the course of 150 years, there was an evolution in how they represented the saint. He was transformed from an antinomian dervish who said and did outrageous things into an eccentric yet socially redeemable figure. This evolution was paralleled by the mutation of his wilderness retreat into a wealthy dervish lodge that formed the nucleus of a suburban neighborhood. Thus, antinomian sainthood at the edge of the city pioneered the taming of the wilderness, followed by urbanization. Paradoxically, individuals who had rejected society pioneered urban development.

This gradual process can be reconstructed in two ways: through the biographies of the saint and his followers, and through the construction of a dervish lodge on the site where the dervish community had been active.

The transformation revealed by the biographies can be reconstructed on the ground through building remains and archival records. The dervish band was patronized by a succession of Ottoman officials who built sections of what eventually became one of the two most important Sufi lodges of Aleppo, visited by every traveler. This process began when the saint's successor at the head of the dervish band established a religious endowment (*waqf*) within the state bureaucracy, effectively becoming the administrator of a conventional sufi lodge.

The resultant structure, the Takiyya of Šayḫ Abū Bakr, consisted of a series of structures built over time by various patrons, that stood along a courtyard. Its architectural style evinces a typical mixture of Istanbul-inspired trends (the low hemispherical dome, the retreat from the street) and the distinctive Northern Syrian decorative technique of bichrome masonry. From the point of view of urban development the most interesting aspect of this dervish lodge and the suburb that developed around it is its history and its changing relationship to the urban core.

Indeed, while the area of the dervish lodge was part of the wilderness in the 16th century, from the 17th to the 19th century, the Ottoman governors of Aleppo used the lodge as an occasional residence, administrative center and burial ground. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Lodge was completely identified with the Ottoman ruling group. The traveler Evliyâ Çelebi, who visited Aleppo in 1671, wrote of being admitted in the enclosure of the Lodge and viewing a city transformed after almost 200 years of Ottoman rule.[35] Seen from this angle, the distinctive pencil-shaped minarets crowning the Ottoman mosques built in the sixteenth century appeared perfectly aligned. Evliya's statement signals that the Lodge, from being an antinomian outpost for the staging of unconventional sainthood, had became a privileged viewpoint through which the powerful could gaze upon a conquered city, and observe all the signs of conquest—including the Ottomanized skyline. Nothing remained in the architecture of the lodge itself that seemed to retain any evidence of its antinomian origins. In other words, the deviant dervishes' retreat had been thoroughly incorporated into an Ottoman visual grammar of power.

35. Evliya Çelebi , *Seyahatnamesi* 9, p. 378. See a more extended discussion in Watenpaugh, "Deviant Dervishes."


© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Šayḫ Abū Bakr and the dervishes who gathered around him in his lifetime and around his grave after his death illustrate the trajectory of a saint and his community, and of their complex relationship to power, landscape and the built environment in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Abū Bakr and his followers formed a community of deviant dervishes whose antinomian asceticism rejected normative Islamic practice risking persecution by the Ottoman state. However, a few years after the saint's death, the dervishes adopted lawful behavior, metamorphosed into a respectable sufi brotherhood, and received the patronage of powerful Ottoman officials. The tomb of Abū Bakr soon formed the nucleus of an architectural complex that served as one of Aleppo's most important sufi institutions and spurred the development of a suburban neighborhood. The dervishes that shared the saint's antisocial ways mutated into the custodians of substantial properties, and became salaried members of the Ottoman religious hierarchy, accepting its norms along with its rewards.

The advantage of the narrative sources used in this case is that they allow a window onto types of struggle over space, and transformations over time. Only the mystical biographies preserve a sense of the early history of the site and its link with antinomianism. The remaining sources—travelers' accounts, legal documents, inscriptions—all reflect the point of view of the later, institutionalized, urbanized version of the dervish community and of the suburb. The biographical sources are most effective when used in tandem with other types of sources—sources such as *waqfiyya*-s that tend to present snapshots of specific foundations, or of the intention of the patron of a foundation, at certain points in time. While the example of the Takiyya of Šayḫ Abū Bakr shows us that the dervishes were finally absorbed into urban order, it also gives us an insight into how this process was negotiated on the ground.

## Conclusion: The Periphery as a Problem in Urban History

This essay outlined the periphery as a particular problem in urban history, and provided an overview of some of the sources and methods relevant to its study in the context of the Ottoman cities of the Arab world. Each of these sources presents opportunities and limitations. On the one hand , the juridical discussions of the urban boundary introduce a sophisticated vocabulary on spatial concepts that remained relatively abstract. On the other hand, the quantitative study of specific urban "equipments" can help in mapping change on the ground. In yet another manner, narrative sources about how lives unfolded in the city can provide a window on how space was lived. Additional sources include legal documents, in particular endowment deeds, repair documents, orders of appointment of employees in a foundation, etc. Each of these sources also presents difficulties and limitations. How did juridical discourse relate to everyday lives? How did the prescriptive language of the endowment deed relate to the way in which spaces were actually used? A quantitative study of urban units can be limited if our knowledge of remains is deficient. Finally, biographical dictionaries, especially mystical biographies, are documents written for particular purposes and audiences, which are quite unlike the contemporary urban and architectural historian's concerns about the history of space.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Ornithologists who study types of habitat and the dynamic interrelationships of species of plants and animals within them use the concept of the "edge habitat." An edge habitat is a region that mediates between two dissimilar habitats, as between forest and prairie. There is no abrupt boundary between the two habitats, but rather an intermediate zone, that partakes of characteristics of both sides. However, the edge habitat also maintains its own character, attracting opportunistic animal species, and giving rise to greater predation. It is tempting to extend this description to urbanism. The urban periphery is a dynamic and uneven zone, that partakes of both the city and its surrounding landscape. Moreover, it is a zone that maintains a distinctive character, or more accurately multiple characters. Social groups or individuals that do not conform to urban expectations take up residence on the urban periphery—such as Bedouin traders, or antinomian saints. In times of urban growth as well as decline, however, the periphery remains the most vulnerable to change. In the case of the Northeastern-neighborhoods, the domain of antinomian sainthood was transformed into an extension of the city, a suburb with a distinct character.

## Bibliography


De Certeau, M., *L'invention du quotidien. 1: Arts de faire,* édition révisée, Luce Giard, Gallimard, Paris, 1990.

Cooperson, M., "Baghdad in Rhetoric and Narrative," *Muqarnas* 13, 1996, p. 99-113.

David, J.-Cl., "L'espace des chrétiens à Alep: ségrégation et mixité, stratégies communautaires (1750-1850)," *REMMM* 55-56/1-2,1990, p. 150-170.

—, "Le plan d'Alep du consul Rousseau, (début du XIX^e siècle) : espace représenté, espace connu, espace pratiqué", in Brigitte Marino (ed.), *Études sur les villes du Proche-Orient. XIII^e-XIX^e siècle. Hommage à André Raymond*, Ifead, Damas, 2001, p. 151-160.

—, *et al.*, *La Suwayqat ʿAli à Alep,* Ifead, Damas, 1998.

—, "Urbanisation spontanée et planification: le faubourg ancien nord d'Alep (XV^e-XVIII^e s.)." *Les cahiers de la recherche architecturale* 10/11, April 1982, p. 14-17.

Denoix, S. *et al.* (eds.), *Le Khan al-Khalili et ses environs: un centre commercial et artisanal au Caire du XIII^e au XIX^e siècles*, Ifao, Cairo, 1999.

Doumani, B., *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

Gangler, A., and Gaube H., "A Quarter of Aleppo in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Some Socio-Economical and Architectural Aspects," *REMMM* 62, 1991, p. 159-168.

Gangler, A., *Ein traditionelles Wohnviertel im Nordosten der Altstadt von Aleppo in Nordsyrien*, Wasmuth, Tübingen, 1993.

Gaube, H. and Eugen W., *Aleppo. Historische und geographische Beiträge zur baulichen Gestaltung, zur sozialen Organisation und zur wirtschaftlichen Dynamik einer vorderasiatischen Fernhandelsmetropole*, L. Reichert, Wiesbaden, 1984.

Al-Ġāzī, K., *Kitāb nahr al-ḏahab fi tārīḫ Ḥalab*, 3 vols., Šawqī Šaʿṭ and Maḥmūd Fāḫūrī (eds), 2nd ed., Dār al-Qalam al-ʿArabī, 1991-1993. Orig. ed. Aleppo, al-Maṭbaʿa al-Mārūniyya, 1923-1926.

Grehan, J. P., *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th-Century Damascus*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2007.

Çelebi, E. (1611-1684), *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, vol. 9: *Anadolu, Suriye, Hicaz (1671-1672)*, 10 vols., Devlet Matbaası, Istanbul, 1896-1938.


AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net

Hivernel, J., "Bab al-Nayrab, un faubourg d'Alep, hors de la ville et dans la cité," *Études rurales* 155-156, 2000, p. 215-238.

Johansen, B., "The All-Embracing Town and its Mosques. Al-Misr al-Gami'," *ROMM* 32, 1981-1982, p. 139-161.

—, "Amwal Zahira and Amwal Batina: Town and Countryside as Reflected in the Tax-system of the Hanafite School," in Wadad al-Qadi (ed.), *Studia Arabica et Islamica. Festschrift for Ihsan Abbas on his Sixtieth Birthday*, American University, Beirut, 1981, p. 247-263.

—, "Urban Structures in the View of Muslim Jurists: The Case of Damascus in the Early Nineteenth Century," *REMMM* 55/56, 1990, p. 94-100.

Kafadar, C., "Self and Others: The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *StudIsl* 69, 1989, p. 122-123.

Kostof, S., *The City Assembled: The Elements of Urban Form Through History*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1992.

Marcus, A., *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.

Necipoglu, G., *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, Reaktion Books, London, 2005.

Piterberg, G., *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003.

Raymond, A., "Cartographie et histoire des villes arabes. Quelques remarques générales," *Environmental Design* 1-2 , 1993, p. 22-31.

—, "Le déplacement des tanneries à Alep, au Caire et à Tunis, à l'époque ottomane: un 'indicateur' de croissance urbaine," *Revue d'Histoire Maghrébine* 7-8, 1977, p. 192-200.

—, "Les fontaines publiques (*sabîl*) du Caire à l'époque ottomane (1518-1798)," *AnIsl* 15, 1979, p. 235-291.

—, *Grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane*, Sindbad, Paris, 1985.

—, "Signes urbains et étude de la population des grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane," *BEO* 27, 1974, p. 183-193.

Rousseau, J.B.L.J., *Voyage de Bagdad à Alep, 1808*, Edited by Louis Poinssot, J. André, Paris, 1899.

Sauvaget, J., *Alep: Essai sur le développement d'une grande ville syrienne, des origines au milieu du XIX^e siècle*, 2 vols., Geuthner, Paris, 1941.

—, "Deux sanctuaires chiites d'Alep," *Syria* IX, 1928, p. 224-237, 319-327.

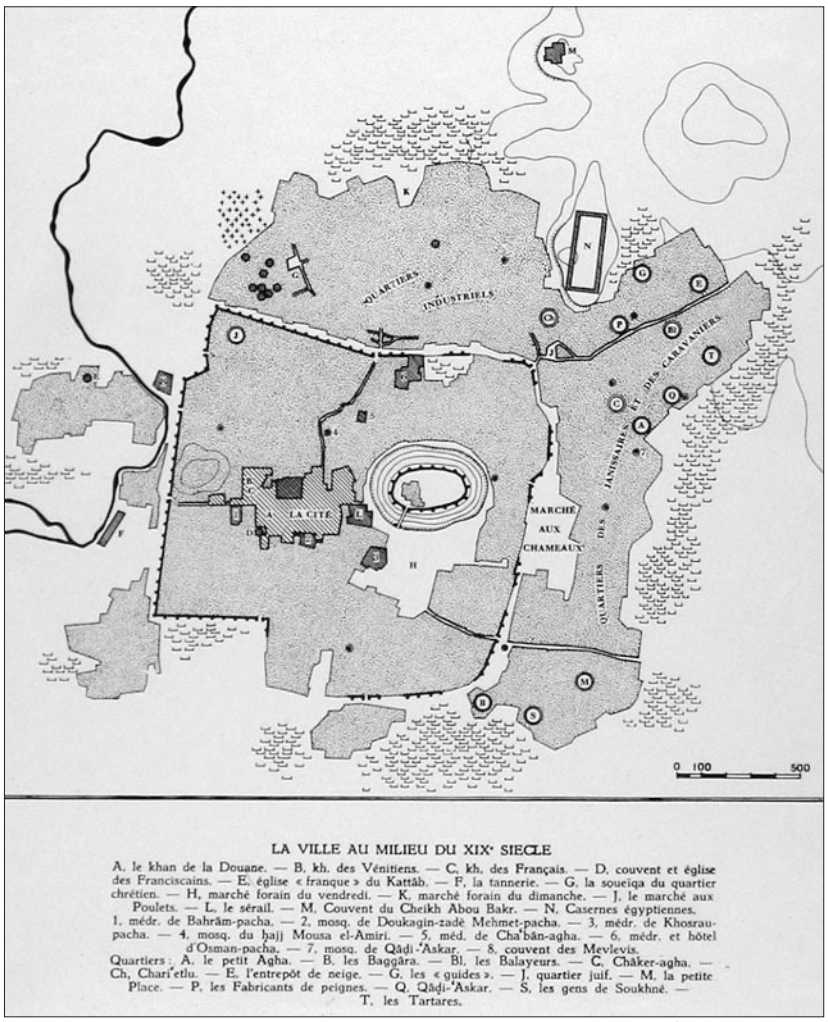
Tabbaa, Y., *Constructions of Power and Piety in Medieval Aleppo*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA, 1997.

al-ʿUrdī, Abū al-Wafāʾ b. ʿUmar (1585-1660), *Maʿādin al-ḏahab fī al-aʿyān al-mušarrafa bi-him Ḥalab*, Edited by ʿAbdullah al-Ġazālī, Maktabat Dār al-ʿUrūba li-l-Našr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, Kuwait, 1987.

Watenpaugh, H.Z., "Deviant Dervishes: Space, Gender and the Construction of Antinomian Piety in Ottoman Aleppo." *IJMES* 37/4, November 2005, p. 535-565.

—, *The Image of an Ottoman City: Imperial Architecture and Urban Experience in Aleppo in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Brill, Leiden, 2004.


© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net




LA VILLE AU MILIEU DU XIX· SIECLE

A, le khan de la Douane. — B, kh. des Vénitiens. — C, kh. des Français. — D, couvent et église des Franciscains. — E, église « franque » du Kattâb. — F, la tannerie. — G, la soueiqa du quartier chrétien. — H, marché forain du vendredi. — K, marché forain du dimanche. — J, le marché aux Poulets. — L, le sérail. — M, Couvent du Cheikh Abou Bakr. — N, Casernes égyptiennes. 1, médr. de Bahrâm-pacha. — 2, mosq. de Doukagin-zadé Mehmet-pacha. — 3, médr. de Khosrau-pacha. — 4, mosq. du hajj Mousa el-Amiri. — 5, méd. de Cha'bân-agha. — 6, médr. et hôtel d'Osman-pacha. — 7, mosq. de Qâdi-'Askar. — 8, couvent des Mevlevis. Quartiers : A, le petit Agha. — B, les Baggâra. — Bl, les Balayeurs. — C, Châker-agha. — Ch, Chari'etlu. — E, l'entrepôt de neige. — G, les « guides ». — J, quartier juif. — M, la petite Place. — P, les Fabricants de peignes. — Q, Qâdi-'Askar. — S, les gens de Soukhné. — T, les Tartares.

**Fig. 1.** Map of Aleppo in the middle of the 19th century. From: Sauvaget, *Alep*, pl. LXX.

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net



**Fig. 2.** Elevated View of the Takiyya of Šayḫ Abū Bakr, Aleppo. (Photo: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, 1936, Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-matpc-00264)

AnIsl 46 (2013), p. 129-144 Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh
The City's Edge. Rethinking Sources and Methods for the Study of Urban Peripheries
© IFAO 2026 AnIsl en ligne https://www.ifao.egnet.net