

Book Reviews

Les mosquées ibadites du Djebel Nafūsa. Architecture, histoire et religions du nord-ouest de la Libye (VIIIe-XIIe siècle), by Virginie Prevost. Society for Libyan Studies, Monograph 10, 2016. 170 full-colour photographs, illustrations and plans. 254pp, Pb. £30.00. ISBN-13: 9781900971416.

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The Djebel Nafūsa is a region located in the north-western part of present-day Libya, between the Tunisian border and the Libyan region of Yafran. Virginie Prevost presents in this book a comprehensive introduction to the region's architectural, historical and religious features linked to the implementation of Ibadism during the Medieval period. *Les mosquées ibadites du Djebel Nafūsa. Architecture, histoire et religions du nord-ouest de la Libye (VIII^e-XII^e siècle)* is a study in three parts that combines historical sources with examples of several mosques that are still identified as Ibadis in the region.

The first part, divided into two chapters, gives a detailed presentation of the geography and settlements of the different regions constituting the Nafūsa: Nālūt, Kābāw, al-Ḥarāba, Jādū (Fassātū), Yafran. The first chapter focuses on the geographical background of the region and the second provides the historical and religious context on the islamization of the region and the implementation of Ibadism within a community of Berbers. The Nafūsa was governed by different rulers during the Medieval period: the Rustumid dynasty (777–909), the Fatimids (909–973) and the Zirids until the 13th century. Prevost stresses several points that help understanding not only the religious architecture of the region but also its society until nowadays: the role played by Christianity and Judaism as well as the multi-confessional aspect of the society, the cult of the Ibadī holy figures despite the rigor of the doctrine and the status of women. The link with Christians who were already present in the region, can be found in certain names of mosques, such as the “Ḥawāriyyīn” mosques, following the tradition of the 12 apostles, or some names involving the terms *taġlīs* (equivalent to *ecclesia*) or *kanīsa* (Christian church).

In the second part, the author provides a systematic catalogue of the mosques from the five regions introduced in part 1. Each mosque is identified with its architectural characteristics and is presented with plans, photographs and detailed descriptions including, among other criteria, the decorative elements or possible inscriptions. This section provides valuable information about the location of each building and an etymological analysis of its name in conjunction with historical sources, in addi-

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tion to bibliographic references. It is worth noting here the methodical use of several plans of Warfalli's thesis, *Some Islamic Monuments in Jabal Nafusa*, dated 1981.

The third and last part serves as an analysis of the main characteristics of the mosques, based on the gathering and evaluation of all the information from part 2. It answers several questions: what conception one may have on the mosques, including some consideration about the technical aspects of these constructions? What are the principal elements characterising these mosques? What kind of decoration one may find?

The mosques of this study are not identical in their conceptions, sizes or orientations. However, they share features that identify them as a group and bring them closer to other buildings in areas affected by Ibadism. Among several characteristics, one may note the following ones:

- most of these mosques have been constructed with an underground prayer room, which highlights not only the practicality and low cost for its construction, but also the association with the cult of the caves originating from the pre-Islamic Berber tradition
- the austerity of these buildings from a technical and aesthetic point of view
- the physical delimitation of a prayer area for women
- the *mihrābs* protruding externally
- the absence of *minbars*
- the presence of perforated pinnacles (*ṣum'a*) or of staircase-minarets rather than tower-base structures
- the presence of simplified Berber decorations on the walls of the halls of prayer.

The volume ends with a detailed bibliography on the region and subject and an index of the proper nouns. The book is illustrated with photographs, maps and plans and includes a useful abstract, preface and table of contents in French, English and Arabic.

Prevost underlines from the beginning of her work the most challenging part of her study: the dating of the buildings, although historical sources show a continuity with the medieval period. Her field study is mainly based on a mission carried out in 2010, during which the author was able to inventory 28 mosques. Despite the fact that she was not able to undertake any archaeological excavations or other missions afterwards due to the current political situation in Libya, the reader can only stress the importance of such study, not only in understanding Ibadism but also medieval history and architecture of the Maghreb. This book indeed demonstrates the importance of interpreting medieval sources in understanding architectural phenomena that are modern reminiscences of social practices in medieval times. One of the strengths of the analysis lies in the detailed presentation of the region and its context from 8th century to present day.

Virginie Prevost thus offers a *catalogue raisonné* of more than twenty mosques of the Nafūsa, which are nowadays threatened to disappear and will probably not be studied again in a near future. It succeeds in bringing its analysis in line with those of other regions affected by Ibadism, such as Djerba, which were also studied by the same author.