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# The Plain of Saints and Prophets

The Nusayri-Alawi Community of Cilicia  
(Southern Turkey) and its Sacred Places

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## Preface

During our several journeys to Syria in the 1980s, we became acquainted with a number of Alawi Arabs who aroused our interest in their “mysterious” religion. In spite of this, and in spite of our shared fascination with the realm of Islamic and Christian popular religion, our decision to write this book was more or less accidental. The purpose of our first field-trip to Cilicia in the spring of 1995 was purely linguistic, the gathering of data for a description of the local Arabic dialect. However, after only a few days we realized that there are two topics the Cilician Arabs really love to talk about: stories recounting the miracles of their numerous saints and prophets; and narratives by those reincarnated members of their community who can remember what happened in their former lives. We frequently made recordings of such narratives in the shade of the Alawi sanctuaries and gradually became more and more fascinated with these shrines—not only with their unusual interior appearance, full of pictures, posters and colorful representations of ‘Alī’s twofold sword, but also by what we might call their “vitality”: we always met some pilgrims even in remote shrines, and the sanctuaries showed no signs of the decline or purification which has afflicted the majority of such popular places in Turkey in the wake of the (so-called orthodox) re-Islamization that began in the 1980s.

To a large extent the “unspoiled” state of the sanctuaries can be explained by the fact that they are almost exclusively visited by pilgrims who are Alawis—a community “marginalized and sometimes even persecuted by successive dominant states since the Mamlūk period” (Firro 2005:12). Thus in the past, and right up to the present, the Alawis have been a minority which is not officially recognized as such. They complain, with good cause, that the current state of affairs is not just to them, since their tax money is being used to build Sunni mosques and to pay Sunni imams without a single pound being provided for Alawi sanctuaries or shaykhs. Nevertheless, all Alawis we met during our long stays in the region, were loyal, and often even enthusiastic, citizens of the Republic of Turkey, who in no way sympathize with separatist or pan-Arab ideas.

But not only have most Sunni Muslims of the past and present regarded the Alawis as heretics and unbelievers, Westerners who traveled through their lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century often wrote of them as pagans—as “a low and degraded people for the most part” (Peters 1897:II, 12), or even as “a strange, wild, bloodthirsty race” (Jessup 1874:35).

Thus their enchanting shrines, the provocative rumors about them, and, of course, the fact that very few studies exist on the Alawi community in Turkey in general, or on the Cilician Alawis in particular, induced us to write this book. Although it is not accepted by all members of the group, we decided to include the

term *Nuṣayrī-'Alawī* in our book's title, since *'Alawī* alone might cause confusion with the much better known and much larger *Alevi* community in Turkey.

After our first three years of intensive fieldwork (1995-97) in the two Turkish provinces of Adana and Mersin, we assumed we would soon have this book done. However, our many duties as university teachers, together with such time-consuming private ventures as the renovation of an early 18<sup>th</sup> century farm house, resulted in many delays in the writing of this study. But this enabled us to make more trips to the region, to revisit sacred places already known to us, and to locate even more sanctuaries of saints and prophets hidden in the backyards of houses or in the numerous orange and lemon groves of the vast Cilician Plain—a region which reveals its beauty to the visitor only on second or even third sight.

This unplanned extension of our fieldwork had the unanticipated but extremely valuable consequence of permitting us to observe and study the changes to the shrines individually, and to the Cilician sanctuaries collectively, over an extended period—a period during which the Alawi community was coming under increasing pressure from the increasingly “fundamentalist” Sunni Turkish society around them. Thus our book perhaps should be thought of not simply as a “snapshot” of Cilician shrines at a given point of time, but as a narrative of their development around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a period of instability and change within the entire Middle East. And perhaps our book should be considered not only as a specialist study of one aspect of contemporary popular Islam, but also as part of the most recent chapter of the thirteen-hundred-year-old saga of Shia versus Sunna.

Finally, though we have first and foremost endeavored to present the “dry-as-dust” facts about the Cilician shrines and the rites observed in them, we hope that from between those facts the reader will be able to glimpse and feel something of the personality and spirit of these hospitable, generous, and warm people, the Alawis of Cilicia.