

Book Review: Making Cairo Medieval

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Nezar Alsayyad, Irene A. Bierman and Nasser Rabbat, eds. *Making Cairo Medieval*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005. 266 pp. \$27.95 (paper).

While much has been written about modernization of 19th century cities, East and West, this volume is perhaps the first systematic, multidisciplinary exploration of its twin process: medievalization. The Egyptian, American, and European-based contributors to *Making Cairo Medieval* offer a fresh perspective on an early instance of what has come to be known as the heritage industry. The book balances textual analyses with on-the-ground case studies to shed light on various aspects of this complex transformation. Much of the discussion revolves around the work of the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe. Yet this volume complicates any impulse to see this process as a complete rupture, and points to ways in which indigenous urban planning melded with European ideologies to inscribe a medieval/modern opposition onto the Cairo cityscape.

In a compelling introductory chapter, Irene A. Bierman explores the production of architectural and stylistic purity, and points to the role colonial powers, and local elites, played in engendering religious and ethnic differences. Buildings were “restored”—and often disassembled—to create dynastic styles such as Fatimid and Mamluk, which formed part of the newly designated medieval Cairo. Architectural features were classified as either “Arab” or “Coptic”, lending materiality to perceptual categories that were, it is implied, less meaningful to the inhabitants of 19th century Cairo that they were to the classification-obsessed scholars of the Comité.

Nassar Rabbat reminds us that the Comité did not represent a complete departure from older ways of thinking about Cairo; the continuing influence of fifteenth century urban geographer Taqiyy al-Din al-Maqrizi represents significant continuity. He argues that Comité member and key modernizer ‘Ali Pasha Mubarak’s history of Cairo owes more to Maqrizi and the medieval Egyptian tradition than it does Western urban historiography. But Maqrizi’s legacy reaches beyond documentary scholarship, informing the work 20th century novelistic treatments of Cairo, such as Gamal al-Ghitani’s *Khitat al-Ghitani*, and Khayri Shalabi’s *Rihlat al-Turshaji al-Halwaji* (The Voyage of the Pickle-and-Sweet-Vendor).

Modernizer Mubarak forms the focus of Nezar Alsayyad’s contribution. The French-educated Mubarak was, as Alsayyad shows, a transnational intellectual who

used the West to interrogate the East, and vice versa, long before this practice became common. He used knowledge of the world beyond to help construct a notion of Egypt, and of Cairo in particular. His practical influence was unabashedly Westernizing; it was through fictional and urban geographic writings that Mubarak contributed to the medievalizing process.

Three chapters focus on Western Orientalism. Derek Gregory looks at the ways in which the *Thousand and One Nights* informed the experience of Western travelers writers. Edward William Lane in particular helped to stage Cairo as the city of the *Nights*, where, in the fantasies of European travelers, images from the tales were continually performed. Art historian Caroline Williams’ largely descriptive chapter traces changing European Orientalist imagery over the century, culminating with introduction of photography. Donald Preziosi explores the evolutionary thinking that helped constitute art history as a discipline. Artistry, represented in museums, was posited as a universal human endeavor at whose apex sat the modern West. Cairo itself was rendered a museum of human evolution, its older quarters delineated, “preserved,” even recreated to represent the premodern, and to underscore the contrast with the modernity of new Cairo. Preziosi emphasizes art history’s role in producing social distinctions, as museums were set up as Pharonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic Christian and Arab Islamic, representing different stages on a trajectory towards an inevitable modernity. Chillingly, the creation of difference was the Europeans’ expressed aim, as they perceived the supposed egalitarianism of 19th century Cairo as an impediment to progress.

Khalid Fahmy seeks to correct the overemphasis on the Khedive Ismail’s mid-century visit to the Universal Exposition in Paris, and subsequent Hausmannization, in the history of Cairo’s modernization. He argues that hygienic, rather than aesthetic concerns were often paramount, and predate this historic trip. Notions of and policies designed to promote public hygiene combined the contemporary European miasmatic theory of disease with older, indigenous notions of urban development that harken back to Ibn Khaldun. Fahmy also provides us with a tantalizing glimpse at how these projects were experienced, and resisted, by ordinary Cairenes.

Heba Farouk Ahmed challenges the notion of Cairo as dual city representing old and new, East and West, medieval and modern. This dichotomy, ubiquitous in 19th century Orientalist writing, belies the native Egyptian experience of the city. By comparing European and Egyptian accounts, Ahmed shows how this duality, the product of a ro-

mantic imaginary central to the development of a tourism industry, obscures the fact that all Cairenes participated in the modernizing project.

Two richly-detailed case studies examine the workings of the Comité in specific contexts, with careful attention to instances of resistance. Nairy Hampikian examines the expropriation of shops and residences around the newly designated monuments of Bab Zuwayla. These were undertaken to reveal an “aspect primitive,” a process which has continued through the 20th century in many Middle Eastern cities. May al-Ibrashy looks at the Comité’s efforts to rid Cairo’s cemeteries of residential structures. In both cases, aesthetic concerns outweighed, even devastated, existing social relations.

It is significant that there is no wholesale castigation of modernist or medievalizing projects, or of 19th European

scholarship. Indeed, the reverence all authors express for the writings of Orientalists like Lane, and the preservation work of the Comité, reflect how the Orientalism debate has matured in recent years.

This important work would have benefited from more careful copy-editing, as the quality and clarity of writing varies considerably. Occasional Arabic phrases, such as “Misr al-Qahirah” (p. 154), need to be translated for the nonspecialist reader. Of which one hopes there will be many, for this book deserves a wide audience. It will engage anyone interested in the ways in which the colonial production and application of knowledge produced history and difference. That oppositions such as East/West, Modern/Medieval are political and social constructs has become academic cliché; the processes of their construction have rarely been given such detailed and fascinating treatment.