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The Muslim City: Continuity and Change

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Ceuta, Tangier and El Jadida: Muslim cities “interrupted”

Historical background

Both shores of the Strait of Gibraltar share a long past of social, military and cultural interactivity between north and south. In 1415 Portugal initiated its Overseas Expansion. The conquest of Ceuta began a settling process that comprised several towns in Northern Africa which would last until 1769, with the evacuation of *Mazagão*. Beyond the evident economical and commercial benefits, Europe’s recognition and religious Reconquest were also aimed. This aspect of the colonial history in Atlantic Northern Africa, which corresponds today to the Kingdom of Morocco, has introduced decisive urban factors.

One can speak of two kinds of establishment in the territory: conquest and foundation. The conquest was a much advantageous process to Portugal, not only for providing an existing urban and commercial fabric, but also for the average duration of these possessions¹: Ceuta (1415-1640), Qsar es-Seghir (Alcácer Ceguer) (1458-1550), Tangier (Tânger) (1471-1661), Asylah (Arzila) (1471-1550), in the north, and also Azemmour (1513-1541) and Safi (1508-1541), in the south.

The foundation was another form of approaching the territory, seeking strategic points of establishment, but less fortunate for the Portuguese crown. New fortified positions in geographically relevant sites allowed an ephemeral effect of Portuguese pulverisation in the Northern African coast. The hostility of the local tribes prevented these positions from a longer staying. The exception was *Mazagão* (1514-1769), today’s city of El Jadida. Looking to the dates presented in the picture, we can see a crisis period between 1541 and 1550, after which only three places were kept under the Portuguese crown: Ceuta, Tangier and

Mazagão, which eventually would change hands again during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Ceuta, Tangier and El Jadida present three different case studies of how the urban morphology has been conducted by the political changes. This paper wishes to analyze the urban strata of these cities in order to point out traces of continuity and rupture between Muslim and Christian rule. Three different urban processes where the Muslim stratum, either suspended, interrupted or present, has been the longest. This paper relies on both historical cartography and new drawn proposition to present this parallel evolution.

Ceuta

Medieval Muslim Ceuta was formed by an urban nucleus, called *medina*, in the narrowest part of the peninsula. To the east, several adjacent suburbs spread until one gets to the largest suburb, the Almina that corresponds nowadays to mount Acho. Westwards, the Out suburb and the later Afrag suburb extended the city into mainland. The Portuguese apprehended this territorial division during the conquest, crossing different walls or moats, later described in the chronicle by Zurara².

This was definitely a too large territory for the Portuguese to defend. Moreover, being the solitary intrusion in Northern Africa for some decades, it suffered from two bigger handicaps: object of constant attack from Fez and total dependence from the metropolis. A shortening of the perimeter reduced the whole area to 14%, concentrated in the former *medina* area, in a procedure called *atalho*.

Within the walls, a central square connected the major spots: the castle (former *kasbah*), the cathedral (former main mosque), the church *Our Lady of Africa* and *rua Direita* (main street). This one ran east towards the wall and parallel to the northern and southern maritime limits, organizing the whole east area of the main square.

The course of the city was confined to those limits for more than two centuries, when the Spanish took over in 1640. With the following arrival of Muley Ismail to Moroccan power, with his new capital in Méknés, a long siege was imposed to Ceuta in order to recapture the city to Muslim hands, but in vain. Spanish Ceuta began to expand towards Almina, the former suburbs over the peninsula. To the present, the city has been recovering much of its medieval area and extended towards mainland, beyond its continental walls, in a process that reoccupied the ancient Islamic domains. Curiously, a majority of Moroccan emigrants live in these new neighborhoods nowadays.

Tangier

Tangier was the main urban settlement of the Strait of Gibraltar to gather a classical mythology still present in the mid 15th century imaginary, giving to the city a special appetite for its possession. Apart from being a Muslim stronghold in Northern Africa or a strategic point between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, Tangier was also a recognizable symbol of power, glory and greatness and the king of Portugal was aware of the upcoming fame. 1471 would definitely put the city into Portuguese hands.

The first level of speculation concerns the reconstitution of the former Merínid perimeter of Tangier, in the 15th century, previous to 1471, of course. The city was much bigger than the actual *medina* surface and the inland wall should have run from the *Kasbah*, parallel to what it's today the Hassan II Avenue, Place de France and Khalid Ibn Qualid Street, down to the beach.

Nowadays, Tangier urban fabric still shows evidence of some layers of the different inputs, either by addition or subtraction. And that's exactly a subtraction exercise which we are going to assist in the first period of occupation. The city was too big for the Portuguese to keep as a sustainable settlement and the king clearly refers the intention of reducing the surface of the city to a quarter (Fig. 3). So, we are in presence of an effective perimeter and surface reduction established by new short cut walls that can be clearly detected by its linearity,

very different from the more organic Islamic typology. The *atalho*, a dimensional and military readjustment, was about to become a routine in Northern Africa.

This perimeter contraction led to a profound change in the sense of the city, pushing Tangier to the sea, for defence and accessibility purposes. The sea was the gate to Portugal whereas the hinterland was the enemy territory. The new geometry housed the two major civil and religious equipments: the castle and the cathedral.

From late 15th to mid 16th centuries, the urban nucleus suffered a public space definition based on the street and square and inducing residential tissue regularization. In Islamic cities perspective and alignment are fought in the street layout, privileging privacy and, thus, originating a labyrinth of street ramification from main axis to the house door. The Portuguese transformations, in this aura of European first abolishment of medieval obstacles, searched exactly the opposite: the street as the main element of the city, place of reunion, meeting and exchange, sided by representative façades, and linking important equipments.

In 1661, Tangier was given to the British as a princess dowry, along with Bombay, by the way. During this short occupation (around two decades), the city kept its main shape, investing on a new mole and opening private gardens among its residential tissue, until it was abandoned to the pressuring Moroccan king.

Since Moulay Ismail times, from 1684 on, the labyrinth is back, interrupting canals and “eating” the interior of semi-geometrical blocks. So, present medina is still the result of the stretching of two walls opened in a ninety-degree angle back in late 15th century. The notable buildings were once more replaced: a new Sultan’s palace over the Portuguese castle and a new main mosque erasing the Christian adaptation of the original Islamic temple.

Nevertheless, Tangier evolved to be one of the biggest and most important cities in Morocco and its growth was first felt beyond a virtual line, as if the territory between the present walls and the original Muslim ones was a no man’s land for a long time, as the aerial photos of 1925 still indicate. That line wasn’t unreasonably built in first place by the Caliphal dynasty but corresponded to an

important defence limit, later used by Portuguese and British to put advanced control barriers, watch towers or forts.

Mazagão or El Jadida

In 1514 the Portuguese established a castle, over a former watchtower, in an almost non-inhabited bay. A quadrangular plan was composed with wall curtains linking four cylindrical towers, being one of them the primitive. The subsequent decades are quite uncertain though the existence of some works in the interior of this castle, willing to respond to a each day more demanding pressure from a spontaneous growing urban assemblage around it, is predictable.

By 1541, the Portuguese decided to build a modern bastioned fortification, with the foundation of a town in its interior, submitted to a grid project (Fig. 4). The royal initiative was managed by a team of architects lead by Benedetto da Ravenna and put into practise *in loco* by João de Castilho³. For more than two centuries and a half, the inexpugnable Mazagão stood in the hand of the Portuguese crown. Until 1769, we assisted to the consolidation of this project: the fortified perimeter was defined by five big bastions, long inflected wall curtains and a surrounding moat; in the centre, the former 1514 castle was adapted to administrative headquarters housing a church, a hospital, store houses for cereals and munitions, a jail and a huge water reservoir.

1769 marks the evacuation of the place due to sustainability problems and another siege by Sidi Mohammed ben Abdallah sultan. The departure lead to the destruction of the walls and bastions when leaving, so that it couldn't be appropriated by the besiegers, and conducted the 2000 inhabitants to Brazil, where New *Mazagão* was founded⁴. *Al-mahdouma*, "the destroyed", was the local denomination for those ruins after the Portuguese abandonment. For almost half a century, the once Christian stronghold rested empty of life and this period accentuated the decay.

Eventually, after the 1820s reconstruction, *mellah*, or jewish neighbourhood became the designation for the in wall area, as they were the first occupants.

Nevertheless, by 1861, descriptions mention 1500 souls divided into European, Arab and Jew population, showing that the reconstructed fortress started slowly to house a synagogue, a zawia and a mosque⁵. One of the four corners of the primitive castle was replaced by the minaret and the mosque imposed a new geometry to the main public space, next to the old church.

During the French protectorate (1912-1956), *Cité Portugaise* was a name that invoked the Portuguese past, in a general effort by the French to enhance heritage culture. It remains as one of the denominations by which this citadel is known in the actual town of El Jadida, “the new one”. In the present time, housing up to 3500 people, this portion of the city is decentralized taking into consideration the “medina” area formed from the 19th century on. One can observe daily changes on the urban fabric as if the Portuguese orthogonal plan was suffering from an “islamization” process: streets are cut or shortened; the demolition of some houses induces the creation of new public spaces; alignments get inflected and perspectives are substituted by privacy and shadow. A new urban order has been installed adapting the Portuguese matrix and evolving into a more recognizable aspect by the exclusively Arab population of the present situation. The former Portuguese circulation circuits were transformed by the addition of the new buildings or the opening of new dead end ways.

Conclusion

Summing up, Ceuta, Tangier and El Jadida present three different urban processes where Muslim and Christian strata are confronted.

Ceuta, once an important Muslim commercial city during medieval times, suffered a process of downsizing when the Portuguese conquered it in 1415, due to sustainability issues. The Muslim occupation was suspended from then on and although its original limits were regained, the Islamic urban fabric was drastically altered and the city image transformed according to European desire to erase the pre-colonial layer.

Tangier offers a typical case of interruption of the Muslim rule over the city. Held by the Portuguese between 1471 and 1661, it suffered a radical reduction of its perimeter and a redirection towards the port. This fortified shape was maintained by the brief British occupation and present day medina retrains itself to that boundary, although recent population boom has pushed the urban assemblage way beyond.

Finally, El Jadida allows us to go back to a non-Muslim origin. Its name - *the new* - reflects the political situation since the 19th century Muslim occupation over a Portuguese foundation of the mid 500s, subverting the orthogonality of the original grid layout within a modern bastioned contour.

The decisive urban factor that prevails when analyzing this diachronical evolution is the Portuguese interval in each case, though briefly followed by the British in Tangier and still happening with the Spanish in Ceuta, as far as reshaping the city is concerned. Politics and religion have been closely together in this path: from the Muslim-Christian situation of Ceuta to the Christian-Muslim phases of El Jadida, passing by the Muslim-Christian-Muslim history of Tangier.

Several encounters between two different concepts have transformed the reading of these Northern African cities in a stratigraphic process of urban archaeology. As a consequence, today, one can double read the architectural form and urban space, but, although sometimes gradual or smooth, the encounters have always engaged a reaction towards different readings of the urban phenomenon. The metamorphosis is occurring daily, conducting a cycle movement in the urban history of the conquered cities of Ceuta and Tangier, while reinterpreting the fabric layer of the most successful foundational case of former Mazagão.

¹ For cities and towns, we decided to use the present denominations for the toponyms of the former Portuguese possessions. The original Portuguese names are indicated in brackets.

² *Crónica da Tomada de Ceuta*, by Gomes Eanes de Zurara. For further reading on Ceuta urban topography, we suggest Gozalbes Cravioto and Gomez Barceló's articles mentioned in the bibliography.

³ *Letter from Luis de Loureiro to João III – Mazagão*, August 25th, 1541, in ANTT, Corpo Cronológico, 1^a parte, m. 70, nº 75.

⁴ Araújo, R. M., 1998. *As Cidades da Amazônia no séc. XVIII*, FAUP, Porto, 1998.

⁵ Descriptions of Rohlf and Séverac, both in 1861, mentioned in: GOULVEN, J., 1918. "L'établissement des premiers Européens à Mazagan au cours du XIX siècle", *Revue de l'histoire des Colonies Françaises*, 6, pp. 385-416.

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