

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 8 No. 3, December 2024

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Abbey Stockstill, *Marrakesh and the Mountains: Landscape, Urban Planning and Identity in the Medieval Maghreb*. Publisher: Penn State University Press, 2024, 168 pages. ISBN # 9780271096766.

Reviewed by: Eric Ross, Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco.

Abbey Stockstill's *Marrakesh and the Mountains* recounts the early development of the Moroccan city as an urban enactment of power and identity. Stockstill is an art historian. Her analysis of the laying out and building of Medieval Marrakesh by a succession of Almoravid and Almohad rulers embraces far more than the usual topics of construction materials, methods, styles, and décor (though these topics are covered in detail).

For Stockstill, the dynastic capital's architecture "is inherently polysemous," expressive not only of a multitude of societal experiences but of particular theological ideas. Its urban planning is understood not so much as a technical process of decision-making and program implementation. Rather, the author analyzes the social forces and cultural norms that underpinned the building and rebuilding of the capital city over two centuries.

Stockstill explains the ideologies as well as the material and social conditions that contributed to the successive configurations of Marrakesh. On the one hand, the discordant theologies of Ibn Tumart and Al-Ghazali, which resonated in court politics through the 11th-13th centuries, are of particular importance for what they had to say about the exercise of power and authority. On the other hand, the social and geographical landscapes within which Marrakesh nestled also helped determine what got built where and how.

By "landscape," Stockstill implies more than the city's oasis setting with its stunning High Atlas backdrop featured on the book cover. The landscape of medieval Marrakesh also includes the complex tribal fabrics that undergirded both the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties, as well as the ethnolinguistic (Berber) and class (pastoralist) identities that structured their politics. The landscape, both man-made and natural, is read semiotically to identify its meanings for those who experienced it at the time. For Stockstill, the urban landscape is not solely a passive "text" that can be read and

understood (Duncan, *The City as Text*, 2004). It is more like a stage set; its meaning is revealed through the performances it emplaces.

Stockstill demonstrates how, far from responding simply to logistical imperatives, major building initiatives such as the alignment of ramparts, location of city gates, orientation of mosques and their relation to the palace, and the arrangement of gardens served as expressions of political ideals and were indicative of political strategies. Notwithstanding the differences in their political ideologies, though, the urban design promoted by both dynasties emphasized a continuum, or “spatial spectrum,” between urban and rural landscapes, rather than setting these up as binary opposites.

Marrakesh and the Mountains presents a comparison of Almoravid and Almohad approaches to building a capital city. While the two dynasties shared some traits, such as pastoral Berber origin and revolutionary religious ideology, they had different strategies for exercising power, and these were reflected in their respective building initiatives. The Almoravids adopted a “first among equals” approach and prioritized the accessibility of the ruler to the population. Their major urban initiatives in Marrakesh were “ad hoc” and pragmatic.

The succeeding Almohads, in contrast, emphasized hierarchy and the remoteness of the ruler. They organized the spaces of their capital city more deliberately. To explain how the Almohads reconfigured Marrakesh, Stockstill integrates an analysis of three of the dynasty’s other major architectural power centers, namely: Tinmal, Rabat, and Seville. The author’s arguments are amply supported by the accompanying illustrations: photos (archival and taken by the author), maps, and site plans (mostly derived from published sources).

Stockstill disentangles the complex meanings of a number of features of the urban landscape. Perhaps the most complex of these was the issue of establishing the proper qiblah orientation to Mecca. The right qiblah was important not just for the validity of the prayers conducted in mosques but for the legitimacy of the entire political regime. Stockstill follows Wilbaux (*La médina de Marrakech*, 2001) in arguing that a change to the qiblah introduced under the Almohads led to a realignment of the capital’s walls and gates.

The author also explores the significance and functions of the Almohad palace gardens and their evocative name (they are called the Agdal Gardens today, a term related to the management of mountain pastures). That these gardens demonstrated the ruler’s mastery of water, a politically crucial issue, is clear. Beyond that, the author shows how the court ceremonies and entertainments held in them enhanced the dynasty’s ideological foundations

as well as its tribal support base. The other features of Marrakesh's landscape explored for what they reveal about power in the Medieval capital range in scale from the vast (the open squares used for official assemblies and reviews called the *rabha* at the time, today's *mechouar*) to the intimate (the exquisitely crafted Kutubiyya *minbar*, or pulpit).

Marrakesh and the Mountains compares favorably with other monographs about historic palace architecture and capital city design. Similar to Sussan Babaie's analysis of Safavid Isfahan (*Isfahan and its Palaces*, 2008), Stockstill explores the court ceremonials set in gardens not just as performances of authority but as political functions that helped secure the dynasty's continued rule. If the focus of Babaie's study is the palace complexes, what most concerns Stockstill is the city beyond. What is most important for her is not so much the activities within the palaces themselves as the manner in which these places of power interacted with the surrounding urban space—the manner in which the secluded politics of the palace fit into the public politics of the capital.

Another distinguishing feature of *Marrakesh and the Mountains* is that it deals with a Medieval dynastic capital rather than an early modern one. There is now a wealth of research on the architecture and design of early modern capitals such as Isfahan, Istanbul, Agra, Delhi, Kandy, and indeed Meknes in Morocco (Barrucand, *Urbanisme princier en islam*, 1985). There are comparatively fewer studies of the political architecture and urban design of the Medieval era (Boucheron & Chiffoleau, *Les Palais dans la ville*, 2004).

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ISSN 2575-6990.