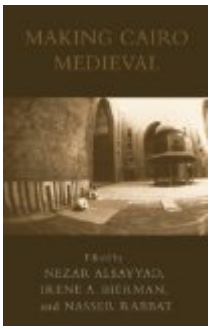
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nezar AlSayyad, Irene Bierman, Nasser Rabbat, eds.. *Making Cairo Medieval.*
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005. vi + 266 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7391-0916-8.



Reviewed by Seif El Rashidi

Published on H-Urban (July, 2005)

Typically, scholarship of the urban development of Cairo has emphasized the dichotomy between its "medieval" and its "modern" quarters, with little critical analysis about how this notion of a dual city came about, or the impacts of this treatment on both perceptions of Cairo and on its subsequent development. Through the work of ten scholars, *Making Cairo Medieval* examines the idea of a "medieval Cairo"--a concept developed in the nineteenth century by people who were essentially outsiders to the historic quarters of the city, yet whose ideas of refashioning such neighborhoods to create a "medievalized" Cairo continue to affect the policies governing these quarters of the city today.

The first section of the book, "A Medieval City for a Modern World," sets the framework around which the ideas that eventually led to the "medievalization" of the city developed. Irene Bierman discusses world exhibitions in which the stage-set recreations of historic Cairo came to be seen as more authentic than the real city itself, thus becoming a guiding prototype for urban policy and intervention. She also outlines the development of conservation policies intent on ensuring the architectural purity of historic monuments (often by editing out buildings or sections of them which did not conform to preset ideas about the style of each epoch).

Nasser Rabbat discusses key literary works on the history of Cairo, namely the fifteenth century *Khitat* of al-Maqrizi, until today seen as the bible for many of the questions related to the city's social and urban history. Unlike the other authors in this volume, Rabbat brings up the idea of Egyptian "cosmo-centrism" (seeing Egypt as the center of the world), tellingly absent from this medievalization process, which was led primarily by europhilic Egyptians, and Europeans in a prenationalistic age. Nezzar AlSayyad, discussing the role of Ali Pasha Mubarak, a europhilic Egyptian par excellence and architect of Cairo's modernization scheme, presents him simultaneously as the writer of the most detailed account of nineteenth-century Cairo, a novelist who captured the prevailing mood of historic change, and the heavy-handed urbanist who worked towards the indiscriminate modernization of the historic city. Ironically, Al-

Sayyad maintains that Mubarak did not contribute to the medievalization process, except through his written works. Yet Mubarak, historic Cairo's self-proclaimed greatest enemy, was in fact an unintentional protagonist in the quest to create a medieval Cairo. As Donald Preziosi argues in the second section of this book, by trying to change the pre-nineteenth-century city, and only partially succeeding, Mubarak helped emphasize the medieval nature of Cairo's historic quarters.

"Representing and Narrating," the second section of the book, considers the Orientalist imaginary of Cairo, and how it became firmly embedded in the minds of non-Cairenes through the works of European artists, photographers, and writers. Derek Gregory, discussing Edward Lane's written works (and illustrations), shows how Lane's portrayal of Cairo life as a series of attractively Oriental vignettes fueled Westerners' imaginations and sent them in search of the "Arabian Nights" in the real-life city. Caroline Williams, through her study of Orientalist paintings and photographs, traces the evolution of the Orientalist painting as a documentary medium. The advent of the photograph changed the role of artists to that of visual interpreters, portraying a hyper-romanticized view of the Orient through their work. These visual and textual references, created for a Western audience, determined what it was visitors to Egypt expected to find: essentially, an Oriental fantasy out of touch with the modern world.

Donald Preziosi's chapter on the role of museums and art history in shaping the public's perception of history through a process of classification, categorization, and conscious selection, perhaps should belong in the first section of the book. Preziosi emphasizes what AlSayyad downplays: that although the creation of new quarters of Cairo seemed to exclude the older, traditional quarters, it depended on them to make the new quarters seem new, and thus it was the old city's existence that gave the new city its identity.

The third section of the book, "Disciplining and Making," examines the reality of Cairo in light of the simultaneous attempts to medievalize and modernize it, and the substantial imagery created through texts and visual impressions of the city. Heba Ahmed, using accounts of various Egyptians and non-Egyptians, discusses how personal impressions of Cairo, invariably taken as objective, factual assessments of the city, differed according to the points of reference and backgrounds of their writers. Ahmed emphasizes that the image of the city was thus shaped by the lens of the viewer. Questioning the concept of a dual Cairo, she argues that the reality of the city was much more complex than the two diametrically opposed worlds often presented, and contends that the creation of new quarters of the city was not enough to change the identity of its inhabitants. Yet, if these new quarters were not really agents of change, weren't they reflections of ongoing or pre-existing change? The fact is that there *were* cultural differences between the old and new quarters of the city beyond the physical differences of urban fabric and form (and such differences are apparent even today).

Khaled Fahmy provides a valuable antidote to much of the discourse covered in this book. Fahmy contends that there were practical factors affecting urban policies in Cairo, and that changes in the city were not solely the results of efforts to emulate Paris (in the new quarters) or recreate the Arabian Nights (in the old). Fahmy argues that concerns about public health were at least as important as aesthetic factors, and that a substantial network of administrators and technocrats had a major impact in shaping urban change.

Nairy Hampikian traces the work of the ***ComitÃ© de Conservation***, the leading protagonist in the mission to preserve historic Cairo, namely by emphasizing the city's medievalness. Using the area around Cairo's southern gateway, Bab Zuwayla, as a case study, Hampikian provides a step-by-step analysis of the process by which the

ComitÃ© reshaped the area to expose the monument in a manner befitting its historic value. Hampikian's analysis points out an interesting fact: that the ComitÃ© and the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works, traditionally portrayed as entities with conflicting goals, were in fact advocates of the same process of urban intervention.

Taking Cairo's cemeteries as a case study, May al-Ibrashy discusses the ComitÃ© from a different perspective: their zeal for preserving historic buildings was based solely on historic and architectural merit, while ignoring the religious and cultic significance which had preserved such structures through private patronage for centuries. Presenting the ComitÃ© and the local population (in this case, the elite and the laymen alike) as rivals for the use of the cemetery, she discusses the precarious position of the *Awqaf* (Ministry of Religious Endowments) as financial patron of the ComitÃ© on one hand, and custodian of the cemeteries as repositories of religious and cultic ritual on the other. Al-Ibrashy concludes, perhaps fittingly for the final chapter in a book on the medievalization of a historic city that is today so poorly preserved (monuments apart), that despite the ComitÃ©'s overwhelming success in establishing a policy treating the cemetery's historic buildings as monuments, its efforts to freeze the cemetery's development and maintain it as a showpiece of the romantic, medieval Orient were futile.

As its title suggests, this book is Cairo-centric. To readers with more than a passing interest in the urban history of the city, ***Making Cairo Medieval*** is a good re-assessment of frameworks too often taken for granted. Considering the making and makers of an image of Cairo, the impacts of that image, and the reality of the city, the book challenges the all-too-easy notion of a bipartite city (one half an Oriental fairytale, and the other a Middle-Eastern Paris). What the book does not do is elaborate on the impacts of the medievalization process today. It stops half a century ago as if the discourse that shaped nineteenth-century Cairo ceased to be relevant. It did not, and perhaps a final chapter on the historic city today would have been in order.

As far as academic publications written by a group of authors go, ***Making Cairo Medieval*** is coherent and relatively easy to read. Illustrations, photographs, and maps help clarify many of the arguments presented. The division of the work into three sections seems somewhat arbitrary, and the titles of the sections, though catchy, say little. The book is valuable in pointing out how deceptive an orchestrated (though seemingly natural) process of urban change can be. Perhaps the book's most important lesson to non-Middle East enthusiasts is that historic cities, like history, are the products of considerable editing and touching up, and that process is frequently overlooked.

Citation: Seif El Rashidi. Review of AlSayyad, Nezar; Bierman, Irene; Rabbat, Nasser, eds. *Making Cairo Medieval.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

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