
Broken Cities: A Historical Sociology of Ruins, by Martin Devecka. John Hopkins University Press, 2020. 184pp., \$34.95. ISBN-13: 9781421438429.

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This is a very interesting book with a global outlook that explores how, why, and by whom cities are ruined. It is based on four chronologically and spatially distinct case studies: 4th-century Greece, ancient Rome, early Islamic Iraq, and 16th-century Mexico.

The author's main contention is that ruination is not a natural phenomenon—a fate that all cities will eventually face—but is instead the result of a deliberate policy or conscious decision by rival cities or states. At this point it should be stated the Devecka explicitly excludes destruction of cities by natural events such as earthquakes and floods. It is not clear if this is because he regards forces of nature as too rare or unusual to be considered as the main causes of ruination, or because he thinks that cities destroyed by nature are usually rebuilt. Whatever his reasons, the available evidence from both history and archaeology suggests that a significant proportion of cities have been ruined as a result of natural events.

The book traces the development of concepts and methods of destruction through two millennia and three continents. The author contends that the majority of ruins were created by rival states as acts of dominance over defeated rivals. He also states that once a city has been ruined it only remains uninhabited as a result of prohibition by the victors. In Devecka's view, the natural process is for cities to be rebuilt once their inhabitants are allowed to return. He argues that this was the standard practice in ancient Greece, where the centre of cities may have been sacked and burnt but the houses were left for repopulation of the city in the future. In support of his argument he states that, although the Greek adjective *anastatos* (ἀνάστατο) is usually translated as ruined, it can more accurately be translated as “displaced” or “made into refugees.” Under the Romans, ruination became a method for extending the empire: instead of creating temporary ruins, cities were to remain deserted as a symbol of the power of Rome. He states that “The Roman Empire was thus in many senses built on ruins: emerging out of the ashes of Troy it made ruins wherever its grasp extended as a condition of its own growth.”

The third chapter considers Baghdad and the early Islamic cities of Iraq. Devecka's argument is that ruins already existed during the formative period of Islamic civilization and were used both as a metaphor for the passage of time and the transient nature of human existence. Specifically, he cites passages from the Quran as well as hadiths and poetry that demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of ruins in the minds of Muslims during the first centuries of Islam. Using the examples of Basra and Kufa, he argues that the earliest cities were “anti-urban,” built in a provisional manner made of temporary materials with rudimentary planning and very few public buildings (p.71). Cities built after the initial conquests—when the Islamic state had become a world empire—contained monumental buildings, many of which included spolia from pre-Islamic settlements. Whilst the characterization of the first Islamic cities as anti-

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urban is debatable (a better description might be anti-classical), it is certainly true that Islam altered the urban geography of the Middle East. Within the new cities spolia from pre-Islamic settlements was used both for convenience and to demonstrate the superiority of the new civilization.

The fourth section of the book discusses the ruination of Tenochtitlán in Mexico by Hernán Cortés in 1521 after a 90-day siege. In their initial encounters with the Aztecs, Cortés and his men were impressed with their cities, which they regarded as comparable to the best examples of Europe and Asia. The Conquistadors drew analogies with Islamic cities, referring to the temples of the indigenous people as mosques. Devecká posits that the destruction of Tenochtitlán carried out by Cortés and his men was out of line with previous policy, citing the Spanish protection of Islamic monuments in the captured cities of Seville, Cordoba and Zaragoza. It should be pointed out here that the crucial difference with Aztec cities was the incorporation of human skulls into the building fabric, which would have made the preservation of these monuments contentious (for a discussion of this practice, see Mendoza 2007).

While it is a positive development to have the Early Islamic period taken seriously in a book about the ebb and flow of civilization from ancient Greece to the Renaissance, there are a few clear mistakes of fact that mar an otherwise stimulating discussion about the place of ruins within early Islamic society. The first error is the frequent mention of stone as a building material in Iraq. Although stone is occasionally used in central and southern Iraq it is rare, and the arch at Ctesiphon (*Taq i-Khusrau*) (p.75) is not made of stone but rather of fired brick. There are also problems with citing geographical locations correctly. For example, in discussing the foundation of Baghdad, he states that the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur chose to locate his new capital not far from Kufa (p.74), when in fact, the distance between these places is over 172 kilometres, or 90 miles. A more serious mistake is found on page 73, where he confuses the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem with the Great Mosque in Damascus. While this does not affect his argument about the monumental competition between Islam and Christianity, it does sap confidence in his understanding of the early Islamic world.

Despite these factual errors (which could easily be corrected) the book is certainly worth reading and provides a useful comparative framework for understanding ruins in different civilizations. The author provides valuable insights that demonstrate both how the Islamic world was informed by the ancient world, and how Islam is an essential component of modern civilization.

Reference

Mendoza, R. G.

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