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# Intractable Cities: Urbanism in the Islamic Sphere of the Later Medieval Mediterranean World\*

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## ABSTRACT

The urbanism of the medieval Islamic world has often been understood as a type of urbanism in which cities and the structures of states were closely entwined – a trait that has been foregrounded as a major difference from the urbanism of Christian Europe in this period. Based on a close-up study of six cities in the later medieval Mashriq and Maghrib, this article argues for a reappraisal of this interpretation. While there was a close link between urban and imperial structures in the early Islamic period, the urbanism that emerged in the period after the collapse of the ‘Abbāsid Empire was of an altogether different nature. Cities and states intersected in various ways, but cities were important political arenas which rulers surprisingly often struggled to control: only in some cities were rulers able to impose urbanistic schemes that dominated the spatial organisation of cities and in many cities they were frequently met with conflict and resistance from city-based populations.

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In a narrative that stretches back to the work of Max Weber, Henri Pirenne and others, cities have often played a central role in accounts about the bifurcation between the “West” and the “rest”. The medieval Mediterranean world, one of the pre-modern world’s most urbanised regions, has often been viewed as a particularly dramatic stage for this divergence. The conventional narrative goes as follows. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, under whose shared umbrella the cities of the Mediterranean world flourished, “European” and “Islamic” cities went on separate paths. “European” cities experienced an urban revolution, saw the development of communes and became entangled in the inexorable rise of capitalism. By contrast, no such scope of action was allegedly available to “Islamic” cities which were said to be beholden to larger empires and ultimately stuck in political arrangements that stopped them from turning into the innovative forces that they were in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

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\*All dates are given in the CE calendar for ease of reference; place names and frequently used terms such as amir or sultan have been anglicised where possible. I wish to thank Caitlin John, Hugh Kennedy and audiences at Leuven, Oxford and Utrecht for their comments on earlier drafts and versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup>M. Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, ed. J. Winckelmann, 5th edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), pp. 727–814; published in English as *The City*, ed. and trans. D. Martindale and G. Neuwrith

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This contrast is difficult to square with the evidence that is available to us today. There is now more systematic comparative work on the medieval Mediterranean world and Europe.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the distinctness of cities in Europe is also hotly debated among urban historians.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world and analyses a crucial claim in the conventional narrative about the divergence between “European” and “Islamic” cities – how closely the urbanism of the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean really was aligned with the structures of states. In the early Islamic period, there was indeed a close link between empire and the kind of urbanism that flourished across this region. It is not surprising, in fact, that the famed cities of the Umayyad Empire (650CE–750CE) and ‘Abbāsīd Empire (750–tenth century) have attracted a disproportionate degree of attention, particularly in synthetic and comparative works. This article, however, focuses on the urbanism that emerged in the following period which, although studied reasonably well for particular cities, has not received the same degree of conceptualisation and comparative interest. Between the fall of the ‘Abbāsīd Empire in the course of the tenth century and the consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century, urbanism predominantly took on a different form. From Syria to al-Andalus, cities in this period were important political arenas that rulers of larger states surprisingly often struggled to control: only in some cities were rulers able to impose urbanistic schemes that dominated the spatial organisation of cities and, in many cities, they were frequently met with conflict and resistance from city-based populations. Cities could not be taken for granted and were important political spaces in their own right. This is not to say that rulers did not try, and in certain cases also succeeded, to foster a more imperial kind of urbanism – but in this period it was the exception, not the norm. Cities often turned out to be intractable social systems that rulers found hard to penetrate. This manifested itself in different ways, as cities were highly diverse and developed particularities that could not only vary from region to region, but also from city to city.

For centuries, imperial urbanism had been a defining characteristic of the Mediterranean world and exemplified a kind of urbanism in which cities and states were closely aligned. This alignment could make itself felt in different ways – from the imposition of particular patterns of spatial organisation on urban environments, often as part of the foundation of entirely new cities, to the integration of cities into the political, social and economic framework of wider empires. Under the Roman Empire, a particular brand of urbanism was rolled out as the empire expanded across the Mediterranean and beyond. Shared topographical features, such as the chequerboard patterns of streets or bath complexes, could be found in cities from Volubilis in Morocco to Bath in

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(London: Heinemann, 1960); H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1925); for relatively recent re-statements of this position, see A. Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); T. Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2011).

<sup>2</sup>C. Wickham, *The Donkey and the Boat: Reinterpreting the Mediterranean Economy, 950–1180* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); *Political Culture in the Latin West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, c.700–c.1500*, ed. C. Holmes, J. Shepard, J. Van Steenberghe and B. Weiler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); *Diverging Paths? The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, ed. J. Hudson and A. Rodríguez (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>M. Prak, *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c.1000–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); F. Ratté, *The Medieval Mediterranean City: Urban Life and Design before European Hegemony, 1250–1380* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021); B. van Bavel, *The Invisible Hand: How Market Economies Have Emerged and Declined since AD 500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

England, many of them founded *ex novo* by Roman colonists. Cities were part of, and helped bankroll, the empire's administrative structure and their elites were crucial connectors between centre and periphery.<sup>4</sup> The Roman Empire was only one of many kinds of imperial urbanism in world history. During the first wave of urbanisation in the Neolithic period, there was often a symbiotic relationship in the development of cities and the formation of states in Mesopotamia or China, even though archaeologists and historians now disagree about the precise chronology and sequencing of these developments.<sup>5</sup> Imperial urbanism was also important in various regions of the medieval globe. In South-East Asia, there was a close connection between the rise of new regimes and the foundation of new capital cities, as in the cases of Angkor (ninth century), Pagan (ninth century), Dai Viet (tenth century) or Sukothai (thirteenth century). Famously, the topographical layout and political organisation of cities was closely entwined with a succession of imperial states in pre-modern China, although historians are these days keen to point out that, even in China, empire was only one of several shaping forces of cities.<sup>6</sup>

There were also instances of imperial urbanism in the Islamic world. The urbanism that developed in the Near and Middle East under the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid caliphates also had many of the characteristics of an imperial type of urbanism. This was most dramatically visible with the foundation of new cities under the auspices of the caliphal framework of power – from army encampments (*amṣār*) that later grew into major conurbations, such as al-Baṣra, al-Kūfa and al-Fuṣṭāṭ, to the foundation of Baghdad as a new capital in 762 by the 'Abbāsid Caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–775) or that of Sāmarrā' in 836 by Caliph al-Muṭaṣim (r. 833–842). Many existing cities were also transformed in the context of the new caliphal politico-religious framework. As successive caliphs had to learn, this does not mean that cities – even Baghdad itself – were easy to rule, but the force of empire bore down on the urbanism of this period to a degree that was no longer possible after the 'Abbāsid Empire's demise.<sup>7</sup> Another successful example of imperial urbanism in the Islamic world comes from the Ottoman Empire, where the imperial government was able to influence the make-up of urban populations through their policy of forced migration (*sürgün*). Cities were islamised in formerly Christian areas, often in a way that replicated a particular model across the sprawling area of the empire, though there were still often local variations.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>J. Reynolds, "Cities", in *The Administration of the Roman Empire*, ed. D. Braund (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), pp. 15–51; C.F. Noreña, "Urban Systems in the Han and Roman Empires: State Power and Social Control", in *State Power in Ancient Rome and China*, ed. W. Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 181–203.

<sup>5</sup>See especially V. Gordon Childe, "The Urban Revolution", *Town Planning Review* 21 (1950): 3–17; M.E. Smith, "V. Gordon Childe and the Urban Revolution: A Historical Perspective on a Revolution in Urban Studies", *Town Planning Review* 80 (2009): 3–29. For critical perspectives, see I. Hodder, "Çatalhöyük: The Leopard Changes its Spots", *Anatolian Studies* 64 (2014): 1–22; N. Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); D. Graeber and D. Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), pp. 276–327.

<sup>6</sup>M.T. Stark, "Southeast Asian Urbanism: From Early City to Classical State", in *Early Cities in Comparative Perspective 4000 BCE–1200 CE*, ed. N. Yoffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 74–93; T. Lincoln, *An Urban History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); H. De Weerd, "China: 600–1300", in *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History*, ed. P. Clark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 293–309.

<sup>7</sup>S. Denoix, "Founded Cities of the Arab World from the Seventh to the Eleventh Centuries", in *The City in the Islamic World*, volumes I–II, ed. S. K. Jayyusi, R. Holod, A. Petruccioli and A. Raymond (Leiden: Brill, 2008), I: 115–43. On imperial urbanism in the early Islamic world, see especially H. Kennedy, "From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria", *Past & Present* 106 (1985): 3–27; P. Wheatley, *The Places Where Men Pray Together: Cities in Islamic Lands, Seventh through the Tenth Centuries* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup>*The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir and Istanbul*, ed. E. Eldem, D. Goffman and B. Masters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–16; I. Boykov, "Byzantine and Ottoman Europe", in *The Cambridge Urban*

Many traits of imperial urbanism, of course, survived into the period that followed the collapse of the ʿAbbāsīd Empire. In the post-ʿAbbāsīd world, there were formidable, if at times brittle and short-lived, empires whose rulers also had imperial ambitions when it came to their cities – from the grand building projects of Mamlūk sultans in Cairo to those of Almoravid and Almohad caliphs in Marrakech. At the same time, these same rulers struggled to impose themselves on the cities of some of the most urbanised regions of the later medieval Mediterranean world. As we shall see, neither the cities of Syria (in the case of the Mamlūks) nor those of al-Andalus (in the case of the Almoravids and Almohads) were as easily absorbed into grand imperial schemes. Nor were the Mamlūks or the Almoravids and Almohads necessarily representative of the wide array of different political formations with which Muslims experimented in this period, from confederacies to principalities and even city-states. Viewed from the vantage point of cities and their inhabitants, rulers often came and went, but cities remained and became important arenas for the negotiation of politics in a variety of different ways.

In what follows, I analyse the urbanism that came to characterise the post-ʿAbbāsīd world by focusing on two parameters. First, I consider the degree to which ruling regimes were able to impose themselves on the spatial organisation of cities. Because of the surviving architectural evidence, it is often tempting to conclude that the material fabric of Islamic cities in this period was the product of ambitious rulers and their courts, but this picture risks being one-sided. There were actually relatively few foundations of new cities after the turn of the millennium and a comparative analysis of building projects across different cities reveals that the degree to which rulers were able to impose a particular kind of urban spatial order varied from city to city. Very few cities were like Mamlūk Cairo, which was an exceptional case and not at all representative of the vast majority of cities. Second, the rich chronicle records of this period reveal high levels of political conflict, with protests, revolts and civil wars being played out in cities in ways that often made life difficult for rulers and ruling elites. The result was that many ended up avoiding particularly troublesome cities or preferred to live in secure neighbourhoods away from potentially troublesome crowds.

This argument builds on recent work in the historiography of cities and states in the Islamic world.<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, the role of the state has loomed large in the study of cities in this period, which has often stood in the shadow of the grand imperial age of the early Islamic era. The most influential monograph on cities in the post-ʿAbbāsīd period was arguably Ira Lapidus's magisterial *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, which, in spite of its general title, was essentially about cities in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria. Lapidus recognised the importance of cities as political settings that oscillated between order and disorder, but he was ultimately interested in the question of how cities like

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*History of Europe*, volume II: *Medieval and Early Modern Europe, c.700-1850*, ed. P. Lantschner and M. Prak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2025).

<sup>9</sup>For more extensive historiographical overviews on both subjects than it is possible to give here, see A. Raymond, "Islamic City, Arab City: Orientalist Myths and Recent Views", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 21 (1994): 3–18; G.A. Neglia, "Some Historiographical Notes on the Islamic City with Particular Reference to the Visual Representations of the Built City", in *The City in the Islamic World*, volumes I–II, ed. S. K. Jayyusi, R. Holod, A. Petroccioli and A. Raymond (Leiden: Brill, 2008), I: 3–46; J. Dumolyn and J. Van Steenbergen, "Studying Rulers and States Across Fifteenth-Century Western Eurasia", in *Trajectories of State Formation across Fifteenth-Century Islamic West Asia: Eurasian Parallels, Connections and Divergences*, ed. J. Van Steenbergen (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 88–155.

Cairo or Damascus inserted themselves into the structures of the Mamlūk state. Lapidus argued that Mamlūk military elites and city-based religious professionals (*‘ulamā’*) were bound together through a symbiotic relationship, which provided long-term stability to the Mamlūk political order.<sup>10</sup> Lapidus’s work inspired many subsequent studies that explored the relationship between military elites and civilian elites in cities, particularly in the context of the Mamlūk sultanate, whose cities have been studied more extensively than those of other post-‘Abbāsīd polities.<sup>11</sup> Scholars of urbanism and architecture have, in turn, heavily focused on the ruling elites of cities, since these were often seen as the driving forces in the organisation of urban space.<sup>12</sup> Two relatively recent developments in the historiography have, however, complicated this picture. First, cities deserve to be studied in their own right rather than just through the lens of the states ruling them. Recent work on topics such as popular culture, urban neighbourhoods and rebellions have shown that urban societies deserve study on their own terms in a way that is not solely or primarily conditioned by the perspective of the ruling regime.<sup>13</sup> Second, historians have also come to embrace the sheer complexity of the post-‘Abbāsīd political framework. The political formations that followed the ‘Abbāsīd Empire were not just smaller copies of the larger empire that had collapsed, but complex political formations of the most varied shapes, which could be brittle and short-lived.<sup>14</sup>

My focus in this article is on highly urbanised regions of the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world: Syria and Lower Egypt as well as al-Andalus and urbanised

<sup>10</sup> Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); *idem*, “The Evolution of Muslim Urban Society”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (1973): 21–50. For a historiographical review of Lapidus’s work, see W. Clifford, “Ubi Sumus? Mamlūk History and Social Theory”, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 45–62.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, C.F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); J.P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); M. Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For a more recent take, see M. Eychenne, *Liens personnels, clientélisme et réseaux de pouvoir dans le sultanat mamelouk (milieu xiii<sup>e</sup>–fin xiv<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Damascus: Presses de l’Ifpo, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> See especially J.L. Bacharach, “Administrative Complexes, Palaces, and Citadels: Changes in the Loci of Medieval Muslim Rule”, in *The Ottoman City and its Parts: Urban Structure and Social Order*, ed. I.A. Bierman, R.A. Abou-el-Haj and D. Preziosi (New Rochelle, NY: A.D. Caratzas, 1991), pp. 111–28. The Mamlūks are, again, particularly well-studied on this front: D. Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and its Culture* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007); J. Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan, 1350–1450: Ruine et recomposition de l’ordre urbain au Caire*, volumes I–II (Cairo: IFAO, 2010); N. Luz, *The Mamluk City in the Middle East: History, Culture, and the Urban Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Ḥayāt al-Ḥajjī, *Aḥwāl al-‘amma fi ḥukm al-mamālīk, 678–784 H/1279–1382* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī, 1984); B. Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); R. van Leeuwen, *Waqfs and Urban Structures: The Case of Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); C. Mazzoli-Guintard, *Vivre à Cordoue au moyen âge: Solidarités citadines en terre d’islam aux Xe–Xle siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003); *Cities in the Pre-Modern Islamic World: The Urban Impact of Religion, State and Society*, ed. A.K. Bennison and A.L. Gascoigne (London: Routledge, 2007); B. Martel-Thoumian, *Délinquance et ordre social: L’état mamelouk syro-égyptien face au crime à la fin du IX<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Ausonius, 2012); C.F. Petry, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); T. Miura, *Dynamism in the Urban Society of Damascus: The Ṣālihiyya Quarter from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); A. Elbendary, *Crowds and Sultans: Urban Protest in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); F. Amabe, *Urban Autonomy in Medieval Islam: Damascus, Aleppo, Cordoba, Toledo, Valencia and Tunis* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> For the Middle East, see especially J. Van Steenberg, *A History of the Islamic World, 600–1800: Empire, Dynastic Formations, and Heterogeneities in Pre-Modern Islamic West-Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); *idem*, “From Temür to Selim: Trajectories of Turko-Mongol State Formation in Islamic West-Asia’s Long Fifteenth Century”, in *Trajectories of State Formation across Fifteenth-Century Islamic West Asia: Eurasian Parallels, Connections and Divergences*, ed. J. Van Steenberg (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 27–87. For the Islamic West after the fall of the caliphate of Córdoba, see P. Guichard and B. Soravia, *Los reinos de taifas: Fragmentación política y esplendor cultural* (Malaga: Sarrià, 2005); R. Rouighi, *The Making of a Mediterranean Emirate: Ifriqiya and its Andalusis, 1200–1400* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); A.K. Bennison, *The Almoravid and Almohad Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).



zones of North Africa. Needless to say, this is a very large area and the cities within it were highly diverse. They belonged to an Islamic sphere in so far as their rulers and elites, and usually the majority of their populations, were Muslims who often thought of themselves as belonging to an “international” Muslim sphere – indeed, Andalūsī urban elites in cities like Granada were obsessed with the history of the caliphate and the traditions of the Mashriq. At the same time, cities were almost always home to multiple religious groups and just because they were “Islamic” in some ways did not mean that Islam was their sole, or even their principal, shaping force. As has often been pointed out, one of the core fallacies of the earlier literature on the “Islamic” city has been the extent to which Islam was viewed as an explanation for everything and for how far cities were essentialised into something “samey” that elided local particularities. This is even more problematic for the post-ʿAbbāsīd period when, in the absence of a shared imperial umbrella, cities became highly diversified. By considering cities in the Mashriq and in the Maghrib we can observe, and compare, this process in different regions that had once belonged to a shared imperial umbrella.

Within the confines of one article, I necessarily had to be selective about my choice of case studies. To capture the diversity of urban experiences, I chose to test my argument against different types of cities drawn from across these regions at different points in time within this period: capital cities of major states, like Mamlūk Cairo and Marīnid Fez; cities like Damascus and Seville that were subject cities, but not capitals, under Mamlūk and Almohad rule, respectively; and city-states like Granada or Ceuta, which, in particular periods, enjoyed an especially high degree of autonomy. Cities found themselves on a spectrum: the degree to which rulers and ruling elites of larger states managed to impose themselves on cities varied considerably. Interestingly, I found that, in both the Mashriq and the Maghrib, there is not necessarily a correlation between the political status of cities and the degree to which regimes were able to control them, as even capitals could prove intractable places to rule. As different as they often were from one another, cities had a degree of agency that rulers ignored at their peril.

## Ruling Regimes and the Spatial Organisation of Cities

In the post-ʿAbbāsīd period, ruling regimes surprisingly often had a more limited impact on the spatial organisation of cities than was the case previously. In the early Islamic period, there was often a close connection between ruling regimes and the spatial organisation of cities. This was most dramatically apparent in cities that were founded *ex nihilo* by powerful rulers. The paradigmatic case of such a new foundation was the great imperial metropolis of Baghdad itself, which was founded in 762 by the ʿAbbāsīd caliph al-Manṣūr – indeed, Baghdad became such an example to subsequent rulers that the legendary green dome of the caliphal palace in the Round City of Baghdad was reproduced by the Mamlūk sultans of Cairo in their citadel more than 500 years later, when Baghdad had already been destroyed by the Mongols.<sup>15</sup> Other dynasties also liked to see themselves as the founders of cities, something that was still true in the immediate

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<sup>15</sup>J. Lassner, *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), pp. 121–54; *idem*, *The Shaping of ʿAbbāsīd Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 163–241; H. Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004), pp. 130–59. The history of green domes stretches back further to seventh-century Damascus: Bacharach, “Administrative Complexes”, 113–14.

aftermath of the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate’s disintegration. Prominent examples are Madīnat al-Zahrā’ in al-Andalus (built under the Umayyad Caliph ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III [r. 912–961] in 936), al-Mahdiyya and al-Manṣūriyya in Ifrīqiyya and al-Qāhira in Egypt (founded by the Fāṭimids between 916 and 969), Qal‘at Banī Ḥammād and Béjaïa in the central Maghrib (built by the Hammadids in the eleventh century), as well as Marrakech (founded in 1070 by the Almoravids). Except for perhaps the building of al-Qāhira under the Fāṭimids, these projects were arguably not on the scale of Baghdad.<sup>16</sup>

Soon after the turn of the millennium, this process slowed down considerably and ground to a halt in many regions of the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world. Not that rulers stopped dreaming of building new capitals for themselves. One prominent exception is the foundation of Rabat under the Almohad caliphate in the second half of the twelfth century, though Rabat’s still unfinished mosque is a reminder that this grand project ultimately failed.<sup>17</sup> Most regimes had to accommodate themselves within existing cities, even as far as their capitals were concerned – whether that was the Ayyūbids in Cairo, Aleppo and Damascus, the Mamlūks in Cairo, the Almohads in Marrakech and Seville, the Hafṣids in Tunis, the Marīnids in Fez and many smaller regimes in their own capitals. Even the Ottomans established their capital in Constantinople, which had a 1000-year long history, although successive sultans so completely reshaped the city that this came close to being a refoundation. Still, according to Sultan Mehmet II’s (r. 1444–1446 and 1451–1481) Greek chronicler Kritovoulos, the sultan wanted Constantinople to become the “strongest city, as it used to be long ago”.<sup>18</sup>

The degree to which ruling regimes were able to insert themselves into the topographies of existing cities varied enormously. This was certainly true for subject cities and city-states, as we shall see shortly, but even capital cities could prove a challenge for rulers and their entourage. It may be helpful to think of capitals as existing on a spectrum – with at one end an exceptional city like Mamlūk Cairo, which did see grand urbanistic projects by the ruling regime, and at the other end, a city like Marinid Fez where the regime’s impact on the existing urban space was more limited.

Mamlūk Cairo was easily the largest metropolis of the later medieval Mediterranean world and came closest to reflecting an imperial model of urbanism. Cairo was ruled by the Mamlūk sultanate between 1250 and 1517, though the nature of the sultanate and the degree of control that it exercised over Cairo changed considerably over time. One of the distinguishing features of the Mamlūk spatial order was the degree to which urbanistic projects by Mamlūk sultans penetrated nearly every corner of the city, as many studies of Mamlūk Cairo have shown and which can be referred to

<sup>16</sup>M. Ación Almansa and A. Vallejo Triano, “Urbanismo y estado islámico: de Córdoba a Qurtuba-Madinat al-Zahra”, in *Genèse de la ville islamique en al-Andalus et au Maghreb occidental*, ed. P. Cressier and M. García-Arenal (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1998), pp. 107–36; F. Arnold, *Islamic Palace Architecture in the Western Mediterranean: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 37–48, 125–39; P. Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 23–51; H. Triki, “Marrakech: retrato histórico de una metrópolis medieval: Siglos XI–XII”, in *La arquitectura del Islam occidental*, ed. R. López-Guzmán (Barcelona: Lunwerg-El Legado andalusí, 1995), pp. 93–106.

<sup>17</sup>S. Mouline, “Rabat, Salé: Holy Cities of the Two Banks”, in *The City in the Islamic World*, volumes I–II, ed. S. K. Jayyusi, R. Holod, A. Petruccioli and A. Raymond (Leiden: Brill, 2008), I: 643–62.

<sup>18</sup>*History of Mehmed the Conqueror by Kritovoulos*, trans. C.T. Riggs (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1954), p. 141; see also Ç. Kafescioğlu, *Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), pp. 18–22, 136–41.



here only in passing.<sup>19</sup> Under the Mamlūk regime, the citadel, begun under the Ayyūbid sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (r. 1174–1193) in 1183–1184, became an important political, military and ceremonial centre in the life of the city and a focal point of the urban space around which a large built-up district developed.<sup>20</sup> Mamlūk sultans also built enormous funerary complexes for themselves in al-Qāhira, the old walled city, which had been the ceremonial and political centre of the Fāṭimid and, later the Ayyūbid, regimes.<sup>21</sup> Under different sultans, entire new districts were developed in addition to the area around the citadel, such as the city's western suburbs, a new cemetery complex known as the Northern Cemetery and the port of Būlāq.<sup>22</sup> Critical for the ability of the Mamlūk regime to penetrate large swathes of Cairo's urban space was the fact that not only sultans, but also senior military commanders (amirs) invested heavily in their own building projects, from their imposing palaces to lavish funerary complexes that included mosques, *madrāsas* (religious colleges) and Sufi convents. The palace complexes of the most powerful amirs could house hundreds of their own soldiers and horses. One of the few extant palaces, that of the Amir Qawṣūn (built in 1337–1338), itself replicated various features of the citadel's architecture. Qawṣūn's monumental hall (*qā'ā*) was directly modelled on the grand hall of the sultan's Qaṣr al-Ablāq in the citadel, while the black and white stripes (*ablāq*) of his grand entrance porch imitated the Qaṣr's distinctive decoration.<sup>23</sup> Amirs did not just imitate sultanic architecture, but were themselves behind innovative building projects. The distinctive shape of the minaret in Mamlūk Cairo – a multi-storey tower built on an octagonal basis and topped by a pavillion – was first experimented with in the mosque complex of Amir Aḷṭunbughā al-Maridānī (1337–1339) before it was imitated across the city by sultans and amirs alike.<sup>24</sup>

For all that the Mamlūk regime exercised a tight degree of spatial control over Cairo, there were also areas that proved harder to penetrate, such as the more peripheral sectors of the conurbation, as we shall see later. It is important to note that the Mamlūk regime was not a coherent bloc, but often internally divided, since amirs were important political players in their own right, who jostled for control over the sultanate and sometimes led factions in civil wars. This meant that amirs were not always guarantors of order and were also responsible for bouts of violent conflict that periodically shook Cairo. Amir Qawṣūn's palace, for instance, became a major site of military confrontations in the early 1340s, when Qawṣūn overplayed his hand by installing an infant on the sultanic throne and provoked a backlash from rival amirs. One of them, Aydughmish, apparently

<sup>19</sup>See especially A. Raymond, *Cairo*, trans. W. Wood (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); D. Ayalon, "The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy", *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 311–29; Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks*; N. Warner, *The Monuments of Historic Cairo: A Map and Descriptive Catalogue* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005); Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan*.

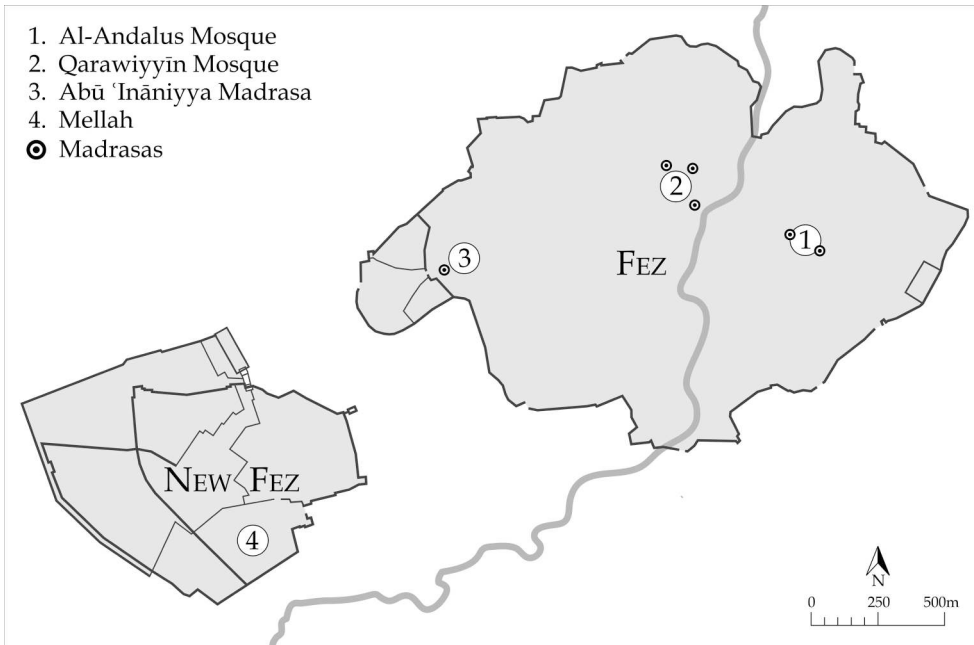
<sup>20</sup>N.O. Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); D. Behrens-Abouseif, "The Citadel of Cairo: Stage for Mamluk Ceremonial", *Annales Islamologiques*, 24 (1988): 25–79.

<sup>21</sup>J. Van Steenberghe, "Ritual, Politics, and the City in Mamluk Cairo: The Bayn al-Qasrayn as a Dynamic 'Lieu de Mémoire', 1250–1382", in *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou and M. Parani (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 227–77.

<sup>22</sup>Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks*, 51–63; Raymond, *Cairo*, 118–37; H. Hamza, *The Northern Cemetery* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001); Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan*, I: 219–61; N. Hanna, *An Urban History of Būlāq in the Mamluk and Ottoman Periods* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1983).

<sup>23</sup>J.-C. Garcin, B. Maury, J. Revault and M. Zakariya, *Palais et maisons du Caire*, volume I: *Époque mamelouke (XIIIe–XVIe siècles)* (Cairo: IFAO, 1982), pp. 48–54, 175–8, plates ii, iv–vii, figs 1–11; Warner, *Monuments*, no. 266; M. Meinecke, *Die mamlukische Architektur in Ägypten und Syrien*, volumes I–II (Glückstadt: Augustin, 1992), I: 86–7, II 179; Rabbat, *Citadel of Cairo*, 214–25.

<sup>24</sup>D. Behrens-Abouseif, *The Minarets of Cairo* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1985), pp. 19–22, 36–9, 93–101, 110; Warner, *Monuments*, nos. 120, 133, 187; Meinecke, *Mamlukische Architektur*, II: 178, 224–5, 269–70.



**Map 1:** Marīnid Fez.

Source: Map by Matilde Grimaldi.

goaded Cairo's common people (called *ḥarafish* by the chronicler al-Shujā'ī) into attacking Qawṣūn's palace and assisted their assault by distracting the guards stationed on its roof. The protesters then went on to loot the properties of Qawṣūn's associates.<sup>25</sup> The Mamlūk regime's urban infrastructure of control could, therefore, easily become an infrastructure of civil war, but that does not take away from the fact that the Mamlūks had a considerable grip on the urban space of Cairo.

It would be a mistake to think that Cairo was representative of other capital cities. A city at the other end of the spectrum was Fez, the capital of the Marīnid dynasty between 1248 and 1465 (see [Map 1](#)). The latter was an ominous date in the history of the city since it saw the assassination of the last Marīnid sultan, 'Abd al-Ḥaqq (r. 1421–1465), in the wake of a major popular uprising in his own capital.<sup>26</sup> In comparison with the Mamlūk regime of Cairo, the Marīnid regime had always struggled to insert itself into the urban space of Fez. Religious foundations are an interesting indicator. Though the Marīnids are credited with introducing *madrasas* to the Maghrib, their numbers were

<sup>25</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma'rifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. M. Ziyāda and S. 'Āshūr, volumes I–IV (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1930–1973), II/2: 574–7, 588–92; al-Shujā'ī, *Ta'rīkh al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn al-sāliḥi wa-awlādihi*, ed. and trans. B. Schäfer, volumes I–II (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977 and 1985), I: 183–6, 189–90. See also R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 125–34; J. Van Steenberghe, *Order out of Chaos: Patronage, Conflict and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture, 1341–1382* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 146–8; A. Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 110.

<sup>26</sup>For Fez under the Marīnids, see especially H. Ferhat, "Marīnid Fez: Zenith and Signs of Decline", in *The City in the Islamic World*, volumes I–II, ed. S. K. Jayyusi, R. Holod, A. Petruccioli and A. Raymond (Leiden: Brill, 2008), I: 247–68; R. Le Tourneau, *Fez in the Age of the Marīnids* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); M. Mezzine, *Fès médiévale entre légende et histoire, un carrefour de l'Orient à l'apogée d'un rêve* (Paris: Autrement, 1992).

much smaller than in comparable cities in the Mashriq. There were only six *madrasas* in Fez that can be dated to the Marīnid period – and even then only to the relatively short time-span between the late thirteenth century and the mid-fourteenth century. All of them were the foundations of sultans, unlike in Cairo where amirs played such an important role in urbanistic projects. The *madrasas* were clustered around the city's two main mosques and not scattered across the city in a way that would have allowed the regime to penetrate and reorientate the urban space of Fez. The only outlier was the splendid Madrasa Abū 'Ināniyya in the western periphery of the walled city.<sup>27</sup> One problem which the Marīnids faced was that Fez had a long history, having been founded in the eighth-ninth centuries by Idrīs I (r. 789–791) and Idrīs II (r. 791–828), descendants of the Prophet and the progenitors of the first Muslim dynasty in the Maghrib. The Marīnids supported the cult that developed around the two Idrīsides in the city, but never entirely succeeded in controlling the city's religious identity.<sup>28</sup> There is altogether little evidence of major investments by the Marīnid sultans in the city's two main mosques, the Qarawiyyīn and al-Andalus Mosques, whose history also stretched back to the ninth century. Interventions were mostly limited to restorations, with Sultan Abū 'Inān Fāris's (r. 1348–1358) library at the Qarawiyyīn as the most significant investment. Also due to this perceived lack of interest, the relationship between the religious elite of Fez and the Marīnid sultans was often tense.<sup>29</sup>

Tellingly, the Marīnid sultans removed their court from Fez within only a few decades of taking the city. In 1276, Sultan Abū Yūsuf (r. 1258–1286) built a new complex of palaces that grew into a palace city that became known as Fās al-Jadīd (New Fez). It covered an area of 130 ha and housed not only the residence of the sultan and his courtiers, but also military barracks, religious foundations and the Mellah, the city's Jewish district.<sup>30</sup> There were many possible reasons behind this move, but among them must have also been concerns about the dynasty's security. In 1248, it took the first major Marīnid ruler, Abū Yahyā Abū Bakr (r. 1244–58), several weeks to take Fez until he was able to find an accommodation with a delegation of urban notables headed by the pious shaykh al-Fishtālī, whose demands he had initially rejected as excessive.<sup>31</sup> Within only a year of taking Fez, his regime was confronted with a major urban uprising that was spearheaded by members of the city's religious elite. The sultan may have been especially concerned that the rebels had been able to enter the city's citadel where they assassinated the sultan's governor al-Sa'ūd ibn Khirbāsh, whose head they then paraded through the streets of Fez.<sup>32</sup> It is entirely understandable that the

<sup>27</sup>M. Shatzmiller, *The Berbers and the Islamic State: The Marīnid Experience in Pre-Protectorate Morocco* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000), pp. 87–93; C. Terrasse, *Médersas du Maroc* (Paris: Albert Morancé, 1928), pp. 18–30; A. Péretié, "Les medrasas de Fès", *Archives Marocaines* 18 (1912): 257–372, pp. 262–84.

<sup>28</sup>For different arguments regarding the degree to which the Idrisid cult was subversive, see M. Shatzmiller, *L'historiographie mérinide: Ibn Khaldūn et ses contemporains* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), pp. 10–36, 136–52; H. Beck, *L'image d'Idris II, ses descendants de Fās et la politique shari'fienne des sultans marīnides* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), pp. 53–154; M. Benchekroun, *La vie intellectuelle marocaine sous les Mérinides et les Wattasides* (Rabat, 1974), pp. 46–57.

<sup>29</sup>H. Terrasse, *La Mosquée des Andalou à Fès* (Paris: D'Art et d'Histoire, 1942), pp. 11–12; *idem*, *La Mosquée al-Qaraouiyyin à Fès* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1968), pp. 61–8; Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 90–2.

<sup>30</sup>H. Bresollette and J. Delarozière, "Fès-Jedid de sa fondation en 1276 au milieu de XXe siècle", *Hespéris-Tamuda* 20–1 (1982–3): 245–318.

<sup>31</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, edited in Arabic as *Histoire des Berbères et des dynasties musulmanes de l'Afrique septentrionale*, ed. W. MacGuckin de Slane, volumes I–II (Algiers: L'Imprimerie du Gouvernement, 1847–1851), II: 257–8; for a recent translation, see *Le livre des exemples*, trans. Abdessalam Cheddadi, volumes I–II (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), II.

<sup>32</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, II: 250–2; Ibn Abi Zar', *Roudh el-Kartas: Histoire des souverains du maghreb et annales de la ville de Fes*, trans. A. Beaumier (Paris: L'Imprimerie Impériale, 1860; reed. Rabat La Porte, 1999), pp. 420–3.

Marīnid sultans wanted to escape the clutches of a potentially rebellious city. According to Ibn Marzūq, a historian writing in the fourteenth century, it was Sultan Abū Yūsuf's ambition to separate himself from the crowds at Fez.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most telling indicator of the Marīnids' disengagement with the urban space of Fez were their burial patterns. Unlike the Mamlūk sultans whose funerary monuments turned the entire conurbation of Cairo into a gigantic royal necropolis, only Sultan Abū Yaḥyā Abū Bakr, chose to be buried in one of the cemeteries of Fez – next to the tomb, in fact, of Shaykh al-Fishtālī. Abū Bakr's successors sought burial in various locations in the surroundings of Fez, a royal necropolis outside Rabat known as the Chella and other parts of the Maghrib.<sup>34</sup>

As the capital of a large-scale polity, Fez was, like Cairo, altogether unrepresentative of the vast majority of cities that were subject cities. Unsurprisingly, imposing a spatial order on subject cities, where regimes were only represented through governors and garrisons, could be even more difficult. There were, of course, exceptions. Under the Mamlūk sultanate, the city of Tripoli was one of the Mamlūk regime's most prestigious experiments with top-down urbanism. After Tripoli had been conquered from the crusaders in 1289, the city was rebuilt under the auspices of the Mamlūk regime *ex nihilo* about four kilometres from the old city around the crusader castle of Raymond of St Gilles. Mamlūk patrons built as many as nine mosques and sixteen *madrasas* in this relatively small city.<sup>35</sup>

Things were not so straightforward in many other subject cities, which could well be major conurbations with a long history of their own, as the example of Mamlūk Damascus demonstrates. When the Mamlūks took control of Damascus in 1260, governors and amirs posted to the city faced the formidable challenge of inserting themselves into one of the Islamic world's most prestigious cities which had itself been a capital under the Umayyad caliphate and subsequent regimes (see Map 2). In many ways, Mamlūk governors and amirs emulated their immediate predecessors in investing in the construction of mosques, *madrasas* and other religious foundations in the city. Unlike in Cairo, where the military elite's investments colonised nearly the entire surface area of the conurbation, the Mamlūk regime's presence in Damascus was more spatially concentrated. Mathieu Eychenne has found that, while most Mamlūk amirs initially lived in existing houses in the old city of Damascus, an increasing proportion moved out into extra-mural areas after 1300.<sup>36</sup> Particularly important were the extra-mural areas that lay close to the citadel, which was itself located at the edge of the walled city and was greatly expanded and developed under the Mamluks. The Mamlūk sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277), who spent about half of his reign in Syria, built a large palace complex,

<sup>33</sup>Ibn Marzūq, *El Musnad: Hechos memorables de Abū l-Ḥasan sultán de los Benimerines*, trans. M.J. Viguera (Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, 1977), p. 102.

<sup>34</sup>Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, II: 26. Some were buried in Fās al-Jadīd: Abū Sa'īd I, 'Uthmān II, Abū 'Inān Fāris, Abū Zayyān II and Abū Fāris 'Abd al-'Azīz: H. Basset and E. Lévi-Provençal, *Chella: Une nécropole Mérinide* (Paris: Émile Larose, 1923), pp. 9–21; Bresollette and Delarozière, "Fès-Jedid", 264.

<sup>35</sup>N. Luz, "Tripoli Reinvented: A Case of Mamluk Urbanization", in *Towns and Material Culture in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. Y. Lev (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 53–73; H. Salam-Leibich, *The Architecture of the Mamluk City of Tripoli* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

<sup>36</sup>M. Eychenne, "Zāhir Dimashq: Travaux et aménagements urbains hors les murs à Damas (1260–1350)", in *Entre deux rives: Villes en Méditerranée au moyen âge et à l'époque moderne*, ed. G. Buti, E. Malamut, M. Ouerfell and P. Odorico (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2018), pp. 93–113, esp. 109–13; *idem*, "Toponymie et résidences urbaines à Damas au XIVe siècle: Usage et appropriation du patrimoine ayyoubide au début de l'époque mamelouke", *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 61 (2012): 245–70.



**Map 2:** Mamlūk Damascus.

Source: Map by Matilde Grimaldi.

the Qaṣr al-Ablāq, by the hippodrome (Maydān al-Akhḍar), which lay to the west of the citadel. Subsequent sultans spent much less or no time in Syria and shifted their focus almost entirely onto Cairo which meant that Mamlūk building initiatives were largely

left to the initiatives of governors and senior amirs, who continued to build especially in Maydān al-Akhḍar and adjacent areas such as Taḥt al-Qal‘at, Ḥikr al-Summāq and al-‘Uqayba. Since many of the patrons in question were only based in Damascus temporarily, urban planning was more *ad hoc* than it was in Cairo.<sup>37</sup> The major exception to this pattern was Amir Tankīz who held the governorate of Damascus for an unusually long period between 1312 and 1340 and engaged in major building works in both the intra-mural and extra-mural areas of Damascus before he was removed from his post by the sultan for becoming too powerful.<sup>38</sup> The upshot of these developments was that the Mamlūk military elite was spatially increasingly concentrated. Major suburbs, such as al-Šāliḥiyya, received much less investment from the Mamlūk elite: although there were some high-profile investments in this area, like the religious complex of the Mamlūk governor Aydamur al-Šāliḥī (r. 1271–1279), this suburb was much less touched by Mamlūk urbanistic interventions and only about six per cent of amiral residences were located there in 1260–1350.<sup>39</sup> The intra-mural area of Damascus also became less important to them over time. Although Mamlūk patrons did continually invest in the repair of and additions to the Umayyad Mosque, including two of its minarets, the Mamlūk military elite increasingly used extra-mural mosques as their principal places of worship, especially that built by the Mamlūk governor Yalbughā (d. 1366) by the hippodrome outside the citadel.<sup>40</sup>

A complex picture also emerges for Seville in al-Andalus. This was another city with an illustrious past; in 1147, it came under the rule of the Marrakech-based Almohad Empire and for a while even served as the Almohad caliphs’ main base in the region. On the one hand, the second and third Almohad caliphs, Abū Ya‘qūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184) and Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb (r. 1184–1199), invested considerably in the city’s fortifications and walls – a common urbanistic intervention of a variety of regimes in the bellicose environment of twelfth-century al-Andalus. The Almohad rulers also sought to re-orientate the city’s topography by moving the city’s religious centre from the old mosque at the heart of the city to a large new mosque complex, whose minaret, the famous Giralda, was modelled on that of the imperial capital, Marrakech. On the other hand, as in Damascus, the evidence suggests that the Almohad regime’s presence in Seville was largely confined to a specific area of the city, in this case a large palatine city, which the Almohads built for themselves close to the new mosque, on a site also used by Seville’s previous rulers. Once again, this area was at the edge of the city and there is little evidence that Almohad elites built palaces or religious foundations on a grand scale in the city itself. They must have largely lived removed from the hustle and bustle of the city.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Meinecke, *Mamlukische Architektur*, I: 19–22; D. Sack, *Damaskus: Entwicklung und Struktur einer orientalisches-islamischen Stadt* (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1989), pp. 28–31.

<sup>38</sup> E.V. Kenney, *Power and Patronage in Medieval Syria: The Architecture and Urban Works of Tankiz al-Nasiri* (Chicago, IL: Middle East Documentation Center, 2009), pp. 22–74.

<sup>39</sup> Eychenne, “Zāhir Dimashq”, 98–9, 109–13; Miura, *Dynamism*, 66–7.

<sup>40</sup> J. Loiseau, *Les Mameloukes, XIIIe–XVIe siècle: Une expérience du pouvoir dans l’islam médiéval* (Paris: Seuil, 2014), pp. 222–5; E. Vigouroux, “La Mosquée des Omeyyades de Damas après Tamerlan : Chronique d’une renaissance (803/1401–833/1430)”, *Bulletin d’Études Orientales* 61 (2012): 123–59.

<sup>41</sup> I. González Cavero, “Arquitectura civil y religiosa en época almohade: Sevilla y Murcia”, PhD diss., Universidad autónoma de Madrid, 2013, II: 109–70, 216–18, 297–311; Arnold, *Islamic Palace Architecture*, 194–215; M. Valor Piechotta and J. Ramírez del Río, “Sobre la cronología de las murallas”, in *Sevilla almohade*, ed. A. Tahiri and M. Valor Piechotta (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1999), pp. 27–40; E.L. Domínguez Berenjano, “La remodelación de Ishbilīa a través de la historiografía almohade”, *Anales de Arqueología Cordobesa* 12 (2001): 177–94; see also M. Valor Piechotta (ed.), *El último siglo de la Sevilla islámica (1147–1248)* (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1995).

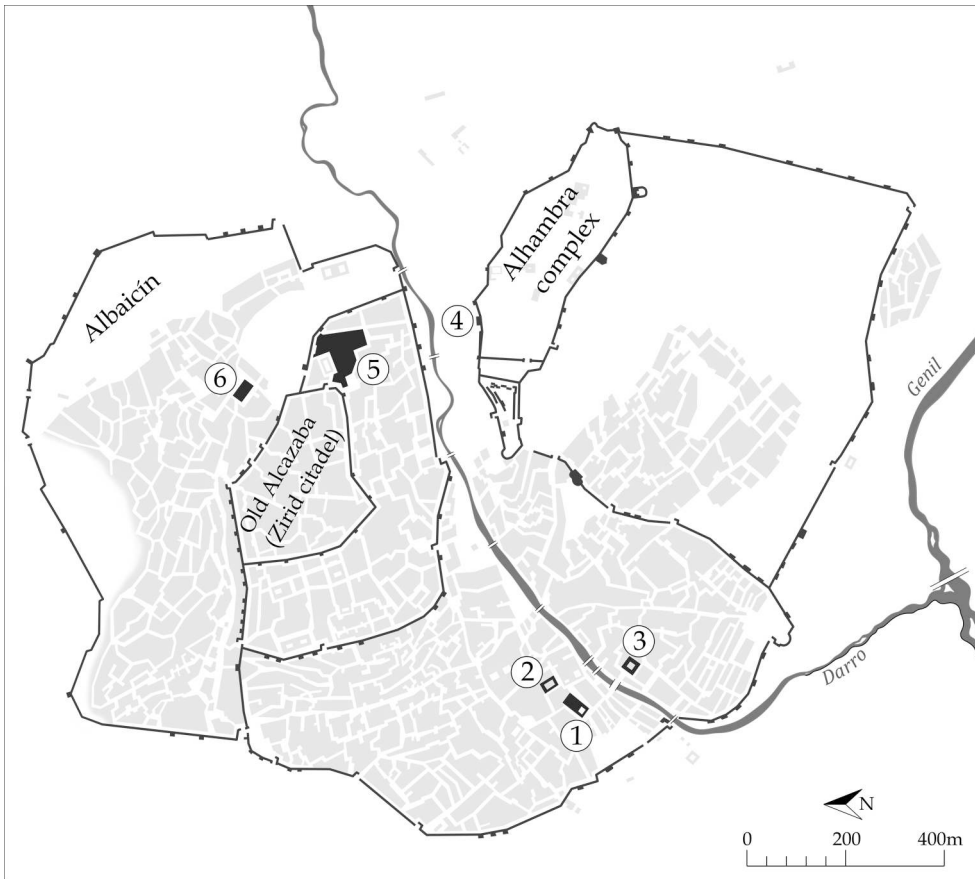


Yet another category of city worth considering was city-states, which ruled comparatively small territories – a phenomenon that could be observed in the Near East, but especially frequently in al-Andalus and North Africa, where the relatively rapid succession of different imperial formations created a vacuum of power that turned cities into crucial political arenas.<sup>42</sup> City-states were usually ruled by semi-autonomous lords, who often had, or came to establish, a close relationship with the city they ruled. This meant that city-based lords were necessarily interested in urbanistic projects, but they often faced a combination of internal and external challenges, which could limit their capacity for intervening in the urban fabric. At one end of the spectrum of Islamic city-states was Granada, ruled by the Naṣrid dynasty for an exceptionally long period between 1237 and 1492. (see [Map 3](#))<sup>43</sup> Building on the urban fabric left behind by an earlier dynasty of city-based lords, the Zirids, the Naṣrid sultans made some interventions in the city's topography, most notably by walling the sprawling suburbs, which grew considerably in this period. They also invested in urban infrastructure but the number of such construction projects was relatively small, especially considering that the Naṣrids ruled for a comparatively long time. Under the stewardship of the vizier Riḍwān, and with the support of three successive Naṣrid sultans, a *madrassa* was built around 1349 in the vicinity of the Great Mosque, a building from the Zirid period. Nearby, several *funduqs* (hostels for merchants) were constructed, only one of which, the Corral del Carbón, still survives. A little further away, a *maristān* (hospital) was built in 1365–1367 during the reign of Muḥammad V (r. 1354–1359 and 1362–1391).<sup>44</sup> Even if we allow for the fact that there may have been other projects that we no longer know about, it is striking that the Naṣrids did not intervene in the urban fabric to a greater degree. They may not have even matched the relatively low number of interventions by the Marīnid sultans in Fez, let alone those of the Mamlūk sultans in Cairo. It is telling that the Naṣrids' most striking monument was situated at the edge of the city and separated from it by the River Darro – the famed palace complex of the Alhambra where, from the reign of the first Naṣrid ruler Muḥammad I (r. c.1237–1273), sultans established their court and headquarters. In moving to the Alhambra, the Naṣrids decided against establishing themselves in the Alcazaba, a much more centrally located palace complex that had been built by

<sup>42</sup>P. Lantschner, "City States in the Later Medieval Mediterranean World", *Past & Present* 254 (2022): 3–49. This subject is best-studied for the *taifas* of al-Andalus; see especially P. Guichard and B. Soravia, *Los reinos de taifas: Fragmentación política y esplendor cultural* (Málaga: Sarría, 2005); D. Wasserstein, *The Rise and Fall of the Party Kings: Politics and Society in Islamic Spain, 1002–1086* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>43</sup>The best starting points now are *The Nasrid Kingdom of Granada between East and West (Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. A. Fábregas (Leiden: Brill, 2021); *A Companion to Islamic Granada*, ed. B. Boloix-Gallardo (Leiden: Brill, 2021). For the topography of Naṣrid Granada, see especially L. Seco de Lucena Paredes, *La Granada nazarí del siglo XV* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra, 1975); I.M.I. Abu Iremeis, "Granada a través de sus monumentos de época nazarí", volumes I–II, PhD Diss., Universidad de Granada, 2003; A. Malpica Cuello, "La expansión urbana de la Granada nazarí y la acción de los reyes granadinos", in *Espacios de poder y formas sociales en la Edad Media: Estudios dedicados a Ángel Barrios*, ed. G. del Ser Quijano and I. Martín Viso (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 2007), pp. 133–53. I would like to thank Ibrahim Iremeis for sending me his doctoral thesis and Adela Fábregas for her help.

<sup>44</sup>Abu Iremeis, "Granada", II: 32–6, 128–32, 156–61, 198–208; A. Malpica Cuello and L. Mattei, *La madraza de Yūsuf I y la ciudad de Granada: Análisis a partir de la arqueología* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2015); A. Peláez Rovira, "El maristán de Granada al servicio del poder nazarí: El uso político de la caridad", in *Caridad y compasión en biografías islámicas*, ed. A.M. Carballeira Debasa (Madrid: CSIC, 2011), pp. 130–70.



1. Great Mosque
2. Madrasa
3. Corral del Carbón
4. Mirador de Lindaraja
5. Maristān
6. Great Mosque of the Albaicín.

### Map 3: Naşrid Granada.

Source: Map by Matilde Grimaldi.

the Zirids in the eleventh century.<sup>45</sup> Like other rulers, the Naşrids may have felt safer from both internal and external attacks in a fortified complex at the conurbation's periphery and preferred to live in a palace city that was, in many ways, self-contained. It is telling that the very extensive inscriptions of the Alhambra's palaces celebrated the Naşrid sultans and their commitment to Sunni Islam, while hardly any reference was made to the city itself. An exception was the so-called Mirador de Lindaraja, an elegantly stuccoed pavillion overlooking Granada from which, according to an inscription above the window, the sultan was able to observe "the capital of his domains (*ḥaḍrat al-mulk*)".<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup>A. Orihuela Uzal, "Granada, entre ziríes y nazaríes", in *Arte y culturas de al-Andalus: El poder de la Alhambra*, ed. C. Pozuelo Calero (Granada: TF Editores, 2013), pp. 47–57; A. Malpica Cuello, *La Alhambra, ciudad palatina nazari* (Málaga: Sarriá, 2007).

<sup>46</sup>J.M. Puerta Vilchez, *Reading the Alhambra: A Visual Guide to the Alhambra through its Inscriptions* (Granada: Edilux, 2010), pp. 230–1.

The vast majority of city-states was much shorter-lived than Naṣrid Granada, making it even harder for most city-based rulers to substantially intervene in the urban fabric. A good example, not all that far from Granada, is Ceuta, a thriving North African city by the Strait of Gibraltar which was ruled by the ‘Azafids, a prominent local dynasty of religious scholars, between 1250 and the 1320s.<sup>47</sup> Their urbanistic interventions were still remembered in a nostalgic description of the city written by the local scholar al-Anṣārī shortly after Ceuta was taken by Portugal in 1415. Yet it is interesting how relatively modest these interventions were for such a powerful family. Al-Anṣārī fondly remembered how the first ‘Azafid ruler, Abū al-Qāsim al-‘Azafī, built a minaret for Ceuta’s second-largest mosque, which was situated in one of the city’s cemeteries. The family was also remembered for some infrastructural projects, but they were comparatively few: a *funduq* with some 50 shops, Ceuta’s largest oven and a big trough to provide water for pack animals. There were necessarily limitations to what the ‘Azafids were able, or willing, to do. Among the hundreds of monuments described by al-Anṣārī, the ‘Azafids’ projects were only a tiny number. It is altogether questionable how much of an impact they actually made on the city’s spatial organisation. Not only was their rule relatively short, but they also faced a variety of military incursions from the Marinids and Naṣrids, as well as internal opposition from within Ceuta, where an urban uprising brought down Abū al-Qāsim’s great-grandson.<sup>48</sup>

The short-lived rulers of Ceuta were, of course, a far cry from the sultans of Granada, let alone the sultans of Marinid Fez, but their story epitomises very well the challenges faced by many a regime in this period: it was not always straightforward, nor sometimes even desirable, to intervene in an urban space which had matured over decades and centuries.

## Cities and Conflict

The limits to the control of regimes over urban space became especially apparent during the frequent moments of conflict in cities, another trait that characterised urbanism in this period. From city-states to capital cities, these could take a whole range of forms, from protests and revolts to outright civil wars.<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, those urban areas in which regimes left a limited imprint were also those parts of cities that were frequently associated with conflict. Especially notorious were the suburban areas of cities, which had often grown haphazardly

<sup>47</sup>J.D. Latham, “The Rise of the ‘Azafids of Ceuta”, *Israel Oriental Studies* 2 (1972): 263–87; *idem*, “The Later ‘Azafids”, *Revue de l’Occident Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 15–16 (1973): 109–26, both published in *idem*, *From Muslim Spain to Barbary* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1986); H. Ferhat, *Sabta des origines au XIVe siècle* (Rabat: Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, 1993), pp. 203–59; M. del Carmen Mosquera Merino, *La señoría de Ceuta en el siglo XIII (historia política y económica)* (Ceuta: Instituto de Estudios Ceuties, 1994).

<sup>48</sup>Al-Anṣārī, *Ikhtišār al-akhbār ‘ammā kāna bi-thaghr Sabta min saniyi al-āthār*, ed. E. Lévi-Provençal, “Une description musulmane de Ceuta”, *Hespéris* 12 (1931): 145–76, pp. 155, 160–2; see also A.M. Turki, “La physionomie monumentale de Ceuta: Un hommage nostalgique à la ville par un de ses fils, Muhammad b. al-Qāsim al-Anṣārī (traduction annotée de son Ikhtišār al-akhbār)”, *Hespéris-Tamuda* 20–1 (1982–1983): 113–62.

<sup>49</sup>On the subject of urban conflict, see especially Elbendary, *Crowds and Sultans*; K. Hirschler, “Protest und Aufruhr in Kairo und Damaskus (7./13. bis 10./16. Jahrhundert)”, in *Islamwissenschaft als Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. S. Conermann and S. van Hees (Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2007), pp. 205–33; P. Lantschner, “Fragmented Cities in the Later Middle Ages: Italy and the Near East Compared”, *English Historical Review* 130 (2015): 546–82.

and were home to a complex, and potentially explosive, mix of people. One such area in Granada was the Albaicín, a sprawling suburb on the outskirts of the city, which in 1486 got embroiled in a civil war between different Naşrid contenders for control of Granada, Boabdil (Sultan Muḥammad XI [r. 1482–1483 and 1487–1492]), on the one hand, and his father and uncle, on the other. According to an eyewitness report, which is also backed up by a Castilian source, the inhabitants of the Albaicín twice rose up to support Boabdil, who supplied them with weapons and thereby exacerbated internal divisions in the city, which paved the way for the taking of Granada by Castile in 1492.<sup>50</sup> That Boabdil reached out to the inhabitants of the Albaicín is not surprising. As the fifteenth-century Egyptian traveller ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ remarked after his visit to Granada, only those Naşrid rulers who were able to cultivate popular support had a chance of surviving.<sup>51</sup> The Albaicín was also home to men and women from lower social classes and got embroiled in conflicts on other occasions.<sup>52</sup> Members of the Naşrid family and other families connected to the court, such as the ‘Abd al-Barr, resided in this suburb, but there is also a sense that the Albaicín was in many ways a town within a town. It had a large mosque, its own *qāḍī* and, during the reign of Sultan Yūsuf I (1333–1354), it acquired its own set of fortifications, some of which still survive. When the Albaicín was visited by the Nuremberg humanist and doctor Hieronymus Münzer in 1494, shortly after the Castilian conquest, he even described it as “another city that was connected to greater Granada”.<sup>53</sup> It is not surprising then that rival contenders of the Naşrid family would vie with one another over control of this suburb. According to the fourteenth-century encyclopaedist al-‘Umari, the Albaicín was heavily militarised and as many as 15,000 warriors could be mobilised from there.<sup>54</sup>

Suburbs also became routinely embroiled in political conflicts in subject cities. Mamlūk Damascus is a case in point.<sup>55</sup> In 1389–1391, the suburb of Maydān al-iafi, in south-west Damascus, became the centre of operations for the rebel amir Miṭṭāsh who provided weapons to its inhabitants and staged feasts there. After his revolt was defeated, Damascenes brutally plundered the suburb to punish the inhabitants of Maydān al-Ḥaṣā for their actions.<sup>56</sup> During another outbreak of civil war in 1497,

<sup>50</sup>*Kitāb Nubḍat al-‘aṣr fi akhbār mulūk Banī Naşr*, in *Fragmento de la época sobre noticias de los reyes nazarites*, ed. A. Bustani and C. Quirós (Larache: A.G.Bosca, 1940), pp. 19–20, 23–5; also confirmed by the Catholic Kings’ chronicler Hernando del Pulgar, *Breve parte de las hazañas del excelente nombrado Gran Capitan*, in *Crónicas del Gran Capitan*, ed. A. Rodríguez Villa (Madrid: Bailly Bailliére e Hijos, 1908), pp. 562–6.

<sup>51</sup>‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ, “Il regno di Granata nel 1465–66 nei ricordi di un viaggiatore egiziano”, ed. and trans. G. Levi della Vida, *Al-Andalus* 1 (1933): 307–34, pp. 313–14.

<sup>52</sup>See, for instance, R. Arié, *L’Espagne musulmane au temps des Nasrides, 1232-1492* (Paris: De Boccard, 1973), 93, 136–7; L.P. Harvey, *Islamic Spain, 1250-1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 321–2.

<sup>53</sup>‘alia civitas magne Granata coniuncta’, Hieronymus Münzer, *Itinerarium*, ed. K. Herbers with W. Deimann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), p. 114; Luis Seco de Lucena, “Cortesianos naşries del siglo XV: Las familias de Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr et Ibn Kumāsha”, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 7 (1958): 19–28, p. 23; see also C. Mazzoli-Guintard, “The Madīna and Its Territory: Urban Order and City Fabric in the Nasrid Kingdom”, in *The Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, between East and West (Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. A. Fábregas (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 237–62, esp. 248.

<sup>54</sup>Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umari, *Masālik al-abṣar fi mamālik al-amṣār*, ed. M. Gaudefroy-Demombynes (Paris: Geuthner, 1927), p. 233.

<sup>55</sup>See also Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 85–95, 153–63; Miura, *Dynamism*, 163–73.

<sup>56</sup>Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *A Chronicle of Damascus, 1389–1397: The Unique Bodleian Library Manuscript of al-Durra al-muḍī‘a fi l-dawla al-zāhiriyya*, ed. and trans. W.M. Brinner, volumes I–II (Berkeley: University of California, 1963), II: 33–8, 59–60, 76–9, 82–3, 89, 129; for these conflicts, see also E. Vigouroux, “La fitna du règne d’al-Zāhir Barqūq à Damas (1389–1393): Troubles et conséquences”, in *Guerre et paix dans le Proche-Orient médiéval (Xe–XVe siècle)*, ed. M. Eychenne, S. Pradines and A. Zouache (Cairo: IFAO, 2019), pp. 419–45.

various suburbs of Damascus also found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict. Maydān al-Ḥaṣā was joined by the nearby suburb of al-Qubaybāt in supporting the rebel coalition led by Mamlūk amirs, while the two suburbs of al-Šāliḥiyya and al-Shāghūr backed the reigning sultan.<sup>57</sup> Four years later, in November 1501, most of the suburbs of Damascus co-operated in a major uprising against the fiscal policies of the Mamlūk governor Qānṣūh al-Burj. On this occasion, the inhabitants of Maydān al-Ḥaṣā and al-Qubaybāt led the way without any evidence for the involvement of senior Mamlūk officials. They gathered at the open prayer space (*maṣallā*) in a peripheral area of the city, agreed (*iṣṭalāḥū*) to take action against the regime and mounted a violent attack on the governor. Their actions eventually forced the governor to negotiate and to agree a compromise with the rebels.<sup>58</sup> It is telling that, with the partial exception of Maydān al-Ḥaṣā, there is little evidence in these suburbs for significant architectural or urbanistic projects by the Mamlūk regime or military elites connected to it.<sup>59</sup> The ability of Miṣṭāsh and other rebel amirs to gain the support of particular suburbs suggests that there were certainly ties between particular officials and specific neighbourhoods, but there was probably often considerable room for negotiation. In 1497, the rebel amir Aqbirdī penned a letter to “the judges, scholars, notables and *shaykhs*” of al-Šāliḥiyya to beg for their support in his uprising against the Mamlūk regime, but the religious scholar Jamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Mabrad al-Šāliḥī successfully persuaded the people (*ahl*) of the suburb to deny him their support.<sup>60</sup> There is considerable evidence from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that the suburbs of Damascus were dominated by violent gangs known as *zuʿr*, who played an active role in the conflicts with the Mamlūk regime. Toru Miura has calculated that as many as 50 reports of incidents involving the *zuʿr* between 1484 and 1516 could be linked to the suburbs that were most actively involved in these conflicts, involving activities ranging from violent assaults on Mamlūk officials to the organisation of banquets for the negotiation of disputes with neighbouring suburbs.<sup>61</sup> The *zuʿr* were also in various ways entrenched in neighbourhood life, since they reportedly collected kickbacks from merchants and shop-keepers, possibly in order to fix prices, organise monopolies and protect them from intrusive officials.<sup>62</sup> We can, therefore, imagine that certain inhabitants of the suburbs of Damascus were heavily armed, perhaps to an even greater degree than the Albaicín. Mamlūk governors routinely issued decrees that banned the *zuʿr* from taking up arms or stopped merchants from selling weapons to

<sup>57</sup>Ibn Tūlūn, *Mufākahat al-khillān fi ḥawādith al-zamān*, ed. M. Muṣṭafā, volumes I–II (Cairo: Al-Muʿassasa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma, 1962–1964), I: 185–96, 199–200; *idem*, *lʿlām al-warā bi-man wulliya nāʿibān min al-atrāk bi-Dimashq al-Shām al-kubrā*, ed. M.A. Duhmān (Damascus: Al-Maṭbaʿa wa-al-Jarīda al-Rasmiyya, 1964), pp. 82–7; Ibn Ṭawq, *Al-Taʿliq: Yawmiyyāt Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Ṭawq*, ed. J. al-Muhājir, volumes I–IV (Damascus: Institut français d’études arabes, 2000–2007), IV: 1541–72. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Nikola Dukas Sardelis and Wahid Amin with these texts.

<sup>58</sup>Ibn Tūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 250–2; *idem*, *lʿlām*, 141–5; the rebels were also eventually supported by al-Qubaybāt.

<sup>59</sup>B. Marino, *Le faubourg du Midān à Damas à l’époque ottomane* (Damascus: L’Institut Français de Damas, 1997), pp. 63–87; Miura, *Dynamism*, 66–7.

<sup>60</sup>Ibn Tūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 199–200. For the position of al-Šāliḥiyya, see also Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿliq*, IV: 1552, 1569.

<sup>61</sup>For the scholarship on the *zuʿr*, see especially Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 173–7; A. al-Ulabī, *Dimashq bayna ʿaṣr al-mamālīk wa-al-uthmāniyyin* (Damascus: al-Sharika al-Muttaḥida, 1982), pp. 95–110; T. Miura, “Urban Society in Damascus as the Mamlūk Era was Ending”, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10 (2006): 157–93 (for the data cited above *ibid.*, pp. 182–3); *idem*, *Dynamism*, 153–66; *idem*, “Who and What Led Urban Riots in the Late Mamlūk Period? Reconsidering the *zuʿr* and Popular Actions in Damascus”, in *Studies on the History and Culture of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517)*, ed. S. Conermann and T. Miura (Bonn: V&R Unipress, 2021), pp. 247–62.

<sup>62</sup>Ibn Tūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 208, 292–3, 316; *idem*, *lʿlām*, 170, 188; Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿliq*, III: 1437.

them. Mamlūk governors also banned officials from hiring the *zur* as auxiliary troops, even though they sometimes did this themselves.<sup>63</sup>

Sometimes, the Mamlūk regime also struggled to exercise control over the more central areas of Damascus. A good example is the Umayyad Mosque, whose history reached back to the eighth century. Successive Mamlūk sultans and governors invested in the upkeep and alterations to this iconic building, but it was nevertheless obvious that this was a monument whose identity transcended that of the Mamlūk regime and was closely connected to the city's identity as one of the foremost centres of Islam.<sup>64</sup> It is telling that, in December 1299, the Umayyad Mosque was the place where members of the Damascene urban elite assembled in the dramatic circumstances of the Īlkhānid invasion of Syria. Most of the Mamlūk officials had fled the city and only the commander of the citadel, Arjuwāsh, was still in town. Nineteen leading city-dwellers and “a large group of Qurʾān reciters, jurisconsults and court functionaries” gathered in a tomb chamber attached to the Umayyad Mosque and decided to dispatch an embassy to the Īlkhānid Sultan Ghāzān (r. 1295–1304) and submit to his rule. When Īlkhānid troops entered the city, they also chose the Umayyad Mosque to read out a decree by Ghāzān in which he tried to sell himself as the ideal Islamic ruler. Mamlūk rule was restored only a few months later, but the behaviour of the Damascene elite left a certain aftertaste and some of them were also punished for collaboration with the Īlkhānids.<sup>65</sup> The Umayyad Mosque remained a site of political activity during Mamlūk rule, with protesters routinely assembling in the courtyard of the mosque or climbing its minarets to shout their slogans. This must have put Mamlūk governors and their officials in an uncomfortable position, in a way that became especially evident in the final decades of Mamlūk rule, for which such episodes are especially well-documented.<sup>66</sup> When, in February 1485, protesters erupted into the Umayyad Mosque, chanting “*Allāhu akbar*” and waving banners, the Mamlūk governor felt so intimidated that he stopped praying there and fled to the Mosque of Tankiz.<sup>67</sup> A good illustration of the interplay between the Umayyad Mosque and the wider urban space of Damascus is a protest that erupted in the Umayyad Mosque in April 1490. After the Friday prayers, a pious man from Maydān al-Ḥaṣā, Yūsuf al-Bahlūl, led a group of protesters that shouted slogans against a sultanic official, who quickly fled the scene. That there was a certain connection with Maydān al-Ḥaṣā also became clear the following day, when the arrest of one of the ringleaders prompted another shaykh, Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Nājī, to lead a group of protesters from that suburb to the Umayyad Mosque, though, according to one chronicler, Ibn Ṭūlūn, they directly went to the lodgings of the hated official.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup>Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 197, 233, 252, 299, 314, 331; *idem*, *l'Īlām*, 108, 156.

<sup>64</sup>A. George, *The Umayyad Mosque of Damascus: Art, Faith and Empire in Early Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); F.B. Flood, “Umayyad Survivals and Mamluk Revivals: Qalāwūnid Architecture and the Great Mosque of Damascus”, *Muqarnas* 14 (1997): 57–79; Vigouroux, “La Mosquée des Omeyyades”.

<sup>65</sup>*Early Mamluk Syrian Historiography: Al-Yūnīnī's Dhayl Mir'āt al-zamān*, ed. and trans. L. Guo, volumes I–II (Leiden: Brill, 1998), II: 99–100, 102–4; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, volumes I–LII (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1987–2000), LII: 73–4. See also R. Amitai, “The Mongol Occupation of Damascus in 1300: A Study of Mamluk Loyalties”, in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. M. Winter and A. Levanoni (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 21–39.

<sup>66</sup>Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 65, 124–5, 147, 153–4, 299; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, I: 431–2, II: 951–2.

<sup>67</sup>Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 65; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, I: 431–2.

<sup>68</sup>Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, I: 124–5; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, II: 951–2.



Similar problems could also arise in capital cities, even when regimes were able to exercise a relatively tight degree of spatial control. Once again, peripheral areas were especially dangerous. In 1009, in the dying days of the Umayyad regime in al-Andalus, a popular revolt in its capital, Córdoba, swept to power a new caliph, who took the name al-Mahdī.<sup>69</sup> According to the chronicler Ibn 'Idhārī, al-Mahdī's supporters came from the suburbs (*arbād*) of al-Gharbiyya, a large district that had developed to the west of the old city. Among them were "innumerable goatherds, butchers, men of the lower echelons (*sufḷa*) and other rabble (*ghawghā'*) of the *sūqs*". Within a few days, the Umayyad political and spatial order collapsed in the city, as the protesters sacked not only the citadel of Córdoba, but also two large urban nuclei at the edge of the city, Madīnat al-Zahrā' and Madīnat al-Zāhira. Though al-Mahdī was killed only a year later, this episode triggered decades of political turmoil in Córdoba.<sup>70</sup>

In Mamlūk Cairo, the most imperial of the cities considered here, the political and spatial order was never quite challenged in the same way by suburban uprisings. However, certain peripheral areas were known as unruly kinds of places, especially the migrant district of al-Ḥusayniyya and Cairo's cemeteries.<sup>71</sup> A memorandum (*tadhkira*) from 1280, drawn up during a period of absence by the sultan, identified both of these as areas that required an additional degree of surveillance. The document also singled out apartment complexes (*rab'*) and sub-let *waqf* properties (*aḥkār*) as potentially dangerous spaces. Soldiers were to patrol alleys, guard the city's gates and to pay particular attention to the boundaries of the conurbation.<sup>72</sup> The greatest threat to sultans, however, came from within the Mamlūk military elite during the frequent episodes of civil war that could have a paralysing effect on the city, as factions of rival military commanders vied to take control of the citadel.<sup>73</sup> Not just the palaces of amirs, but even religious complexes could become sites of combat in such situations. The funerary complex of Sultan Ḥasan, for instance, stood right opposite the citadel and was often appropriated by rebel military commanders as a base for their assaults. In 1391, Sultan Barqūq (r. 1382–1389 and 1390–1399) was so concerned that he ordered the destruction of the stairs that had been used by rebels to climb the building's roof and its minarets. In September 1438, access to the top of the building was again prohibited with the explicit support of Cairo's chief *qāḏīs*, who had been summoned to the Friday mosque of the citadel by Sultan Jaqmaq (r. 1438–1453) to discuss this matter.<sup>74</sup> Though such conflicts did not ultimately really challenge the political and spatial order of the city, they also created a context within which non-Mamlūk groups staged protests, often on

<sup>69</sup>For this episode, see also Amabe, *Urban Autonomy*, 85–117; P.C. Scales, *The Fall of the Caliphate of Córdoba: Berbers and Andalus in Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 57–77.

<sup>70</sup>Ibn 'Idhārī, *Al-Bayān al-mughrib fi akhbār al-Andalus wa-al-Maghrib*, volume III, ed. E. Lévi-Provençal (Paris: Geuthner, 1930), pp. 50–64; the quote is from the partial translation of the passage in Amabe, *Urban Autonomy*, 96–7. For suburbs and neighbourhoods in Córdoba, see Mazzoli-Guintard, *Vivre à Cordoue*, 66–72, 95–100.

<sup>71</sup>W.M. Brinner, "The Significance of the Ḥarāfish and Their 'Sultan'", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 6 (1963): 190–215; Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 174–7; Petry, *Criminal Underworld*, 55, 64, 69–70, 230, 290, 294; P. Tetsuya, "Cairene Cemeteries as Public Loci in Mamlūk Egypt", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10 (2006): 83–116.

<sup>72</sup>L. Fernandes, "On Conducting the Affairs of State: A Guideline of the Fourteenth Century", *Annales Islamologiques* 24 (1988): 81–91.

<sup>73</sup>See, for instance, the especially turbulent period between 1341 and 1382, studied in Van Steenberghe, *Order out of Chaos*.

<sup>74</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-i'tibār fi dhikr al-Khiṭāt wa-l-āthār*, volumes I–II (Būlāq: al-Ṭibā'a al-Miṣriyya, 1853), II: 316; Ibn Taghribirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fi mulūk Miṣr wa al-Qāhira*, volumes I–XVI (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1929–1972), XV: 273. See also Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks*, 205.

Rumayla, the large parading ground in front of the citadel. In the summer of 1339, for instance, tensions within the Mamlūk military elite about one of the sultan's favoured officials, al-Nashū, triggered protests outside the citadel by popular groups, including orphans, widows and cripples. Demanding the official's dismissal, they staged performances and played music, while carrying banners and Qur'āns. The sultan was so concerned about the situation getting out of hand that he banned amirs and soldiers from carrying weapons, though he eventually had to order al-Nashū's execution.<sup>75</sup>

If even the Mamlūk sultans of Cairo had reason to be concerned about the control of their capital, it is not altogether surprising that things were even worse in Fez – the paradigmatic example of a city where it all went wrong for the ruling regime. In 1465, Fez became the stage for the assassination of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥaqq (r. 1421–1465), which also brought down the Marīnid dynasty.<sup>76</sup> The exact sequence of events is difficult to reconstruct on the basis of the only two contemporary sources to talk about them in any detail, but it seems clear that the sultan's death happened against the background of a popular uprising that reflected the regime's weak grip on the urban space.<sup>77</sup> The popular uprising started with an attack on the Jewish district (the Mellah), because the inhabitants of Fez were outraged about a Jewish official's assault on a local Muslim woman. The Mellah was located in Fās al-Jadīd and so the riots rapidly spilled over into an attack on the royal palaces, which were located very close by. The sultan had long stood accused of excessive proximity to the city's Jews who, according to some indications, had moved to Fās al-Jadīd because their presence in the old city had been seen as polluting Fez's sacred sites and had led to earlier attacks.<sup>78</sup> The religious elites of Fez were divided over the uprising, but the involvement of some crucial players among them also reflected the degree of the Marīnid dynasty's disengagement from the city's urban space. A crucial role was, for instance, played by the Qarawīyīn Mosque, the city's principal mosque, which, as we have seen, had received relatively little attention from the Marīnids. One of its senior religious officials, Abū Fāris al-Waryāghilī, was so outraged by the Jewish official's assault that he ran “through the streets (*shawārī*) and alleyways (*ṭuruqāt*) of Fez” to incite the crowds to rebel. The *muftī* Sīdī 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Qawrī, allegedly acting under the pressure of the rebels, produced legal opinions that authorised the killing of Jews and resistance against the sultan.<sup>79</sup> The leader chosen by the rebels also reflected the Marīnid

<sup>75</sup>Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, II: 475–88; see also A. Levanoni, “The al-Nashw Episode: A Case Study of ‘Moral Economy’”, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9 (2005): 207–20. On the citadel as a site of protest, see Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 53, 54, 55, 57, 60, 63, 122; Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 145–6, 148, 176; Elbendary, *Crowds and Sultans*, 133–4, 114, 169–70; Hirschler, “Riten der Gewalt”.

<sup>76</sup>The only detailed modern study is M. García-Arenal, “The Revolution of Fās and the Death of Sultan 'Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Marīnī”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 43–66, which also includes a detailed analysis of later sources that discuss the uprising; but see also Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II*, 240–8.

<sup>77</sup>These were the accounts written by the Egyptian merchant 'Abd al-Bāsīt, who was in Tlemcen at the time, and the Ifriqīyan chronicler al-Zarkashī: *Deux récits de voyages inédits en Afrique du Nord au XVe siècle*, ed. and trans. R. Brunschvig (Paris: Larose, 1936), pp. 49–55; Al-Zarkashī, *Ta'rikh al-dawlatayn al-muwahhīdiyya wa-l-ḥafsiyya*, ed. M. Mādūr (Tunis: Al-Maktaba al-'Atīqa, 1966), p. 156, trans. E. Fagnan, *Chronique des Almohades et des Hafsiides attribuée à Zerkechi* (Constantine: A. Braham, 1895).

<sup>78</sup>Brunschvig, *Deux récits*, 53; al-Zarkashī, *Ta'rikh*, 156. See also D. Corcos, “The Jews of Morocco under the Marīnids”, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 54 (1964): 271–87, 55 and (1965), 53–81, 137–50; S. Gibson Miller, A. Petruccioli and M. Bertagnin, “Inscribing Minority Space in the Islamic City: The Jewish Quarter of Fez (1438–1912)”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 60 (2001): 310–27, pp. 310–13, 324; Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 57–68.

<sup>79</sup>Brunschvig, *Deux récits*, 52–3. For the difficulties in identifying al-Waryāghilī, who is called Sīdī Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad by 'Abd al-Bāsīt, see García-Arenal, “Revolution”, 46, 56–7; Beck, *L'image d'Idrīs II*, 247.

regime's long-standing difficulties with Fez: Muḥammad ibn ʿImrān was the head of the *sharīfs* (*mizwar al-shurafāʿ*), a set of families in Fez who claimed descent from the Prophet Muḥammad and whose role was perceived as especially important in a city that had been founded by two descendants of the Prophet, Idrīs I and Idrīs II. Only three decades earlier, the tomb of Idrīs II had been found and had soon become the centre of a cult that was closely associated with the religious elites and *sharīfs* of Fez. Muḥammad ibn ʿImrān's father had possibly been involved in the tomb's discovery alongside Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd Allāh al-ʿAbdūsī, al-Waryāghilī's predecessor at the Qarawiyyīn.<sup>80</sup> Muḥammad ibn ʿImrān became the new ruler of Fez, as Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq was slaughtered in an abattoir and faced the ultimate ignominy – of a city turning against its own rulers.

## Conclusion

By the time the Ottomans came to power, urbanism in the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world had diverged significantly from a straightforwardly imperial model. Across a variety of different types of cities – capitals, subject cities, city-states – even ambitious regimes often struggled to impose spatial schemes and faced high levels of conflict and revolt. Rulers and ruling elites had to find ways of co-existing with cities that had evolved over decades, if not centuries, and had to face the reality that cities were important political arenas in their own right that often defied insertion into a particular imperial model. Different regimes had different degrees of success – but none quite managed to match that of the Mamlūks in Cairo which, in spite of various challenges, was more imperial in character than any other city between the decline of ʿAbbāsīd Baghdad and the rise of Ottoman Istanbul. There were many reasons for these developments: the fiscal and military capacity of ruling regimes was often diminished; long-established cities were home to multiple political actors and groups that made claims on urban space, both in a physical and a political sense; and, in the absence of large numbers of new cities, many conurbations had long histories and an associated heritage that could not be so easily overturned. In this context, capital cities, subject cities and city-states, each in its own way, were important arenas whose agency could not be ignored.

The agency of cities in the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world has often been downplayed – particularly, as we have seen earlier, in the context of comparisons with Europe. Urban historians have often been drawn to the so-called “communal revolution” in Italy and other regions, where the development of city governments was often seen as a marker of urban agency.<sup>81</sup> However, there was more than one way in which the political role of cities became apparent. The evidence collected here from various urbanised regions in the Mashriq and the Maghrib suggests that urban populations played a significant role in the political order in multiple different ways. The obstacles that rulers and ruling elites faced

<sup>80</sup>Brunschvig, *Deux récits*, 49, 52, 55; al-Zarkashī, *Taʾrikh*, 156. On 1437, see Beck, *L'image d'Idris II*, 225–33; García-Arenal, “Revolution”, 56–7. On the role of the *sharīfs*, see also M. Kably, *Société, pouvoir et religion au Maroc à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986), pp. 291–302; Beck argues that the *sharīfs* may not have formed a coherent party in 1465: Beck, *L'image d'Idris II*, 244–5.

<sup>81</sup>S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900–1300*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); P. Blickle, *Kommunalismus: Skizze einer gesellschaftlichen Organisationsform*, volumes I–II (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000).

when it came to intervening in urban spaces illustrate just how much cities were political arenas whose internal distribution of power, distinct historical traditions and religious set-up were not easy to interfere with. The frequency with which urban populations were protagonists in political conflicts, revolts and civil wars in city-states, subject cities and even capital cities suggests that they were in a position to set political agendas – and, as Sultan ‘Abd al-Haqq had to learn in Fez, this could have serious consequences, including the death of a ruler or a change of regime.

How different the agency of “Islamic” cities was from that of their “European” counterparts is perhaps also a somewhat moot point. For one, cities in the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world were very diverse, especially after the collapse of the ‘Abbāsid caliphate in the tenth century, as there were differences from region to region and city to city. There was a comparable diversity of experiences on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, where the importance of communes has arguably been exaggerated: even in Italy, which is often seen as the prime example of a region characterised by intractable cities, communes were only one of several urban political organisations and most cities anyway ended up being ruled by lords or found themselves under the umbrella of some larger political framework.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, many of the ways in which the agency of cities manifested itself in the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world were also apparent in its Christian sphere. Recent studies have shown how often rulers and governments also had to face frequent protests, revolts and civil wars in Christian cities. Just as neighbourhoods and other forms of urban political organisation became apparent in Islamic cities in the wake of political conflicts, similar networks were also active in cities on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>83</sup> The extent to which rulers and governments were able to impose a spatial order on their cities also varied. In heavily urbanised regions, such as Italy, governments often had to tread carefully when it came to imposing grand urbanistic interventions on established urban topographies at this time. The Norman rulers of the Kingdom of Sicily, often viewed as particularly and precociously assertive monarchs, usually preferred to build their castles at the edge of great cities such as Bari or Salerno rather than to opt for more invasive spatial policies.<sup>84</sup> In a much later period, even the famed rulers of Italian Renaissance states did not have an easy ride in their cities. While invasive urban projects were more successful in smaller cities like Mantua or Urbino, the Visconti and Sforza dynasties operated within serious constraints when they tried to impose spatial and architectural schemes on as large a city as Milan. Their urban *castello* at Milan, built at the edge of the built-up city, was burnt down by rebels in 1447 and re-built with a serious bulwark to forestall any future attacks.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup>On this subject, see T. Scott, *The City-State in Europe, 1000–1600: Hinterland, Territory, Region* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); C. Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World: The Emergence of Italian City Communes in the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Lantschner, “City States”.

<sup>83</sup>S.K. Cohn, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); P. Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities: Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370–1440* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*, ed. J. Firnhaber-Baker and D. Schoenaers (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>84</sup>P. Delogu, “I Normanni in città: Schemi politici ed urbanistici”, in *Società, potere e popolo nell’età di Ruggero II* (Bari: Centro di studi normanno-svevi, 1980), pp. 173–206.

<sup>85</sup>P. Boucheron, “‘Non domus ista sed urbs’: Palais princiers et environnement urbain au Quattrocento (Milan, Mantoue, Urbino)”, in *Les palais dans la ville: Espaces urbains et lieux de la puissance publique dans le Méditerranée médiévale*, ed. P. Boucheron and J. Chiffolleau (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2004), pp. 249–84; P. Boucheron, *Le pouvoir de*

It is striking that, for all that the divergence between Christian and Muslim spheres has been the subject of much discussion, city-dwellers in both spheres lived through an era in which their greatest cities played a significant role in the political order, as they turned into important political arenas when large-scale empires were in retreat in many parts of the later medieval Mediterranean world. It is important to rebalance historiographical assumptions and focus on the ways in which this manifested itself not only in the Christian, but also in the Islamic sphere of the Mediterranean world. The agency of cities is, therefore, an important factor that should be taken into account when it comes to studying states and empires in this period. From Damascus to Granada, and from Fez to even Cairo, the agency of cities was not just something incidental or episodic that manifested itself in the one or other “disorder”, but it was part and parcel of the post-‘Abbāsid political order, especially in highly urbanised regions such as those considered here. The intractable cities that came to characterise later medieval urbanism had repercussions for centuries to come – in the shape of cities that are hard to control.

### Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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*bâtir: Milan (XIVe–XVe siècle)*, new edition (Paris: Points, 2023), pp. 142–55, 453–5. For citadels in Northern and Central Italy, see A. Zorzi, “Un segno della ‘mutazione signorile’: L’arroccamento urbano”, in *Marquer la ville: Signes, traces, empreintes du pouvoir (XIIIe–XVIe siècles)*, ed. P. Boucheron and J.-P. Genet (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2013), pp. 23–40.