Portuguese cities unveiled: interpreting the present *medina* in the Maghreb

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Historical and geographical context

Portuguese presence in Northern Africa lasted from 1415 to 1769. This was never a territory understood as a colony to the crown but rather based on the conquest and occupation of Arab and Muslim cities, consisting on isolated enclaves along the coast. Ceuta was the beginning of a settling process that would comprise the conquering of several coastal urban assemblages and the establishment of castles in geostrategic points in a process that rather than being pre-determined, it adjusted to the political instability of the region. (Figure 1)

Figure 1. South Iberia Peninsula and Northwest Africa map, showing all the Portuguese possessions and some reference cities

Traditionally, historiography has divided Portuguese occupations and settlements into two important areas. On the northerner tip of the territory, the military takeover of Ceuta, followed by Ksar Seghir in 1458, Asilah and Tangier in 1471, defined what was then called as the "overseas Algarve". Further south, Safi in 1508 and Azemmour in 1513 contributed to a broader plan by King Manuel I to prevent Marrakesh from accessing its sea ports and to acquire a commercial leading position. Several castles, such as Mazagão in 1514, were also built in strategic relevant sites along the coast, as

back protection for the recent conquered cities. Another one was erected in Santa Cruz, today Agadir. In 1541, this castle and adjacent town became the ultimate turning moment for Portuguese ambitions in the Maghreb when they were taken in a military assault. Consequently, a complete evaluation of the Portuguese presence was engaged resulting in a significant shrinkage of the military expression in the Maghreb, with the exception of a new fortified investment in Mazagão, where the Portuguese were to remain until 1769[1].

Occupation and settlement

Throughout this political and military process, new symbols of faith and power were urgent in Christian territories subtracted to the kingdoms of Fez and Marrakesh and now completely devoid of the autochthonous population. The key issue spins around the foundation of a new image of city where, not only churches or cathedrals evolved from former mosques, but also late-gothic castles effaced Muslim *Kasbahs*.

However, Portuguese influence in former Muslim cities of the Northwestern coast of Africa didn't resume to changes in their public buildings. It went beyond and took the whole urban surface into account for the establishment of new city concepts. Most of the times, the inherited in wall area was too large for the scarce military means of the conqueror. Thus, in the cities the Portuguese occupied a pragmatic attitude was the rule, oriented towards the fortresses' sustainability in a hostile environment.

Significant reductions in their perimeter and surface were carried out, in a procedure known as *atalho* (downsizing)[2]. This technique led to a radical analysis of the appropriated cities, regularizing them geometrically, opening the urban space to the harbor and re-evaluating their internal disposition. After the shortening process, sectors of former Islamic cities were preserved within a tighter circuit of walls. A new image of the urban space was pursued during the occupation course wishing to match a European identity which faced difficulties when inheriting Muslim fabrics and households.

Urban appropriation

One can speak of a first degree of urban appropriation where very pragmatic decisions had to be made, including a selection of inherited morphological urban elements. Since the earliest years the Portuguese tried to identify signs of familiarity in the street layout. For example, *Zanqat Ibn Isa* in Ceuta was immediately assumed as the new main street due to its broad section and quite linear trace. Then called *Rua Direita* – direct or main street-, it connected important town gates or notable public buildings and it allowed for new public performances of military parade or Christian religious procession.

Upon the conquest, Maghreb cities presented a model where public spaces were usually absent. The new Portuguese settlers envisioned central squares or yards as places of gathering or public announcements by the governor or captain. Ceuta's central square was particularly keen on establishing a logistic platform that linked *Rua Direita* with the castle and the cathedral, seeking a geometrized regular configuration.

Indeed, a tendency towards a grid sketch of the whole urban display was the result of decades of slow Portuguese intervention. Morphological urban consequences were

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[1] *Letter from Luis de Loureiro to João III* – Mazagão, August 25th, 1541, in ANTT (Arquivos Nacionais da Torre do Tombo), Corpo Cronológico, 1ª parte, m. 70, n. 75.
[2] Correia, 2008, p. 353-357.

reflected in the way of a continuous rejection of the inherited fabric; now, street lifestyle proposed the opening of more windows towards the public space.

Similar aspects can be observed in Ceuta's rival city on the southern shore of the Strait. Nowadays, Tangier's urban fabric still shows evidence of some layers of the different inputs, either by addition or subtraction. It was exactly a subtraction exercise that the city assisted in the first period of occupation. The city was too big for the Portuguese to keep as a sustainable settlement and the king clearly refers the intention of reducing the surface of the city to a quarter[3]. (Figure 2) So, we are in presence of an effective perimeter and surface reduction established by new short cut walls that can be clearly detected by its linearity, very different from the more organic Islamic typology. The *atalho*, a dimensional and military readjustment as mentioned before, was about to become a routine in Northern Africa.

Figure 2. Tangier: aerial view, 1925

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

From late XVth to mid-XVIth centuries, the urban nucleus suffered a public space definition based on streets and squares, which induced residential tissue regularization. In traditional Islamic cities, perspective and alignment were fought in the street layout, privileging privacy and, thus, originating a labyrinth of street ramification from main axis to the house door. Portuguese transformations, in this aura of European first abolishment of medieval obstacles, searched exactly the opposite: the street as the main

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[3] MENEZES, 1732, p. 34: "Parecendo-lhe depois, que a cidade era grande, e necessitava de igual presídio para sua defesa, a mandou cortar, e reduzir a mil vizinhos, tendo antes mais de quatro mil, que isto fazem as mudanças do tempo, e dos impérios; (...)".

element of the city, place of reunion, meeting and exchange, sided by representative façades, and linking important public buildings.

Nevertheless, a second degree of urban appropriation occurred in Azemmour and Asilah where signs of regular planning are clearer. In the early decades of the XVIth century there were opportunities to create new towns from scratch, taking advantage from completely or almost empty areas that were free from built constrains as it was usual in the rest of the conquered coastal cities, such as Ceuta or Tangier.

So, not only levels of adaptation or creation have varied, but also the sources for their identification are asymmetrical, depending from case to case. Apart from Spanish Ceuta and Ksar Seghir, which remained as an archaeological field, the thin Portuguese stratum is encapsulated between long Islamic periods. How is it possible to recover this particular European urban legacy? Both cities along the strait of Gibraltar have always gathered considerable cartography. However, in other cities the existence of any kind of historical mapping is almost absent. Through urban fabric analysis and resulting from recent field research, especially in Azemmour and Asilah, this paper wishes not only to unveil the Portuguese layer but also to contribute for the identification of tools for that purpose.

Through urban fabric analysis and resulting from recent field research, it is possible to track how the narrow Portuguese period has marked the urban image of the town at a time when urban concepts and practices were being modernized through the experience with the founding of medieval new towns and the renovating hygienist spirit underlying an announced modernity in Europe. The search of a new identity related to a new lord and faith has induced strategies of regularization, now subordinated by a permanent re-Islamization process.

The castle/town of Azemmour

From the elongated shape along the river, the Portuguese decided to keep only its northern sector[4], transforming Azemmour into a castle/town (due to its small urban size) which today corresponds to the Kasbah/Mellah neighborhood. Military architecture played a fundamental role, being wall curtains and bastions geometrically disposed in order to create an efficient defense system and a homogeneous safe area around them, targeted through fire[5].

Plans for establishing a town inside the new castle soon gained consistence as its inner surface was large enough to accommodate an estimated number of 1000 inhabitants[6]. In 1516, Captain Simão Correia proposes an urban plan where attention was called upon street display, embracing Manueline focus on public space. Letters exchanged between the captain and the crown insisted in the building of new houses inside the castle, called "new town", whereas the built areas excluded by the *atalho* operation should be demolished and the "old town" erased[7]. The quadrangle of the former Arab city that the Portuguese selected was described as "empty, with nothing there", except for the two main inherited buildings - the formers Kasbah and the mosque to be consecrated as

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[4] *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc*, I, p. 438-442.
[5] Lopes, 2009, p. 167-173.
[6] A projection of between 1000 and 1250 inhabitants has been proposed, taking into account the garrison, men residents, their wives, children and elders (Dias, 1996).
[7] *Letter from Rui Barreto to Manuel I,* 21 February 1514, in *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc*, I, p. 489-501.

church - which apparently isolated[8]. All these signs, together with the use of terms such as "arruar" or "calçar", suggest an urban plan similar to a new town's model (like the *bastide*).

Nowadays, first impressions on Azemmour's Kasbah neighborhood, the former Portuguese area enclosed by the castle walls, reveal huge housing jams organized around patios. The Portuguese main street and axis, then *Rua Direita* and now Derb Mellah, part of Derb Kasbah plus Derb Touamia or, alternatively, just Derb Souika alone, still assures the accessibilities to those blocks. However, taking into account the changes caused by centuries of Islamic reoccupation that followed the Portuguese presence meanwhile, an attentive examination of the fabric plots can point other directions. In fact, the remaining of some empty canals among houses, as well as the obstruction of passages by long shaped constructions, indicate traces of former streets. By cleaning the plan of those obstacles, it is possible to recover the original town planning and, therefore, a series of long rectangular shaped blocks. (Figure 3)

Already in 1516 around 81 houses were under construction, most probably between the uptown area around the church and the downtown riverside cluster around the exchequer and customs[9]. The two most regular and central blocks, the one sided by the church and its western neighbor between derbs Touamia and Sidi ben Abdallah, show propensity to standard measures around 30 brasses for the long side and 10 for the top side. Going down, the rectangle module seems to adjust itself to a more challenging topography whereas more distant blocks from the urban core favor a less geometrized fabric due a later Islamic occupation.

Figure 3. Azemmour: Identification of the Portuguese street display

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[8] Idem.
[9] 'Pagamentos à gente de ordenança e aos trabalhadores das obras da cidade e do castelo, 1514/1516' in ANTT (Arquivos Nacionais da Torre do Tombo), Núcleo Antigo, cód. 765, fls. 107, 117, 125v, 134, 154, 175, 197, 207.

Moreover, and even though Azemmour's built environment has been completely renovated, an architectural survey of houses still shows how the central area remains the most ancient as it was most likely to be renovated in first place by an Arab and Jewish presence. Urban morphology methodologies allow retrospective keys to the reading of an important urban clash occurred in the early 1500s. Less than three decades of Portuguese presence in Azemmour were enough for the establishment of instruments of regular urbanism that still mark the town's present dimension and street display more than four and a half centuries after the Islamic reoccupation.

This idea seems even more consistent if one compares the former Portuguese castle/town to the rest of the current Azemmour's medina. Reconstructed several times, the medina is structured by a street layout in accordance to a hierarchical network. From main streets to dead ends leading to each house, Islamic urban culture is significantly more related to social aspects of private life, determined by Muslim laws, than to geometrical questions of regularity. The comparison with the current Kasbah/Mellah sector, where the afterwards Jewish settlement most probably helped preserve certain urban aspects, makes this evident.

In the medina area, one can still observe the application of Islamic law rules referring to medieval traditions. The concept of fina' is a key element, an open space surrounding or bordering a certain household whose usage is given to the owner. By other words, the fina' translates into a daily practice of preferable loading, unloading or animal tying and parking by the owner, meaning a virtual extension of the house towards the public space. Therefore, the effective use of fina' contributed to narrowing lanes and making these canals look winding. The vertical projection of this urban right of usage to the upper floor led to the building of consoles hanging over the street or even sabat, meaning passages over streets[10]. These are much more present in the medina area than in the former Christian town area, meaning how Portuguese layout has lasted.

Here, the urban stratum enlightens the intentions of 1516 which would establish six quadrangular blocks in Azemmour. The imposed rationality finds similarities with Asilah as far as central units are concerned, where length measures are also close. From the resemblances between Asilah and Azemmour, it is possible to point out logics of intervention that surpass, not only the geographical field of each action, but also the agents concerned. Therefore, the concepts involved in both towns walk along the tradition of drawing and building *bastides* in late medieval Europe.

A 'new town' for Assilah

Conquered back in 1471, it was an Arab siege and assault in 1508 that accelerated the process of building up a serrated *atalho*, which reduced the town to 45%. From a big rounded shape which corresponded to medieval Islamic Asilah, the Portuguese decided to keep only its sea-facing half and the new shape was composed by two juxtaposed rectangles, the smaller being the castle and the town occupying the bigger. Once again, military architecture played a fundamental role for the newly reduced perimeter. Wall curtains and bastions were geometrically disposed in order to create an efficient defence system and a homogeneous safe area around them, targeted through fire. Master builder Diogo Boytac was called to Asilah in 1509 and till the following year not only did he personally conducted the erection of a new donjon, but also established a work plan to be conducted by another master builder, Francisco Danzilho, between 1511 and 1514.

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[10] Hakim,1986, p. 27-30.

The plan articulated two distinct dimensions. The late-medieval looking tower insisted on sending a rhetorical message to the outside, affirming a new lord and faith over Asilah, whereas the fortified belt adapted itself to the most recent military techniques, displaying pre-modern architectural innovations for gunpowder combat. Braun's atlas engraving, and a rare surviving iconographical source of the time, depicts the situation during the process, with the donjon already built, but several portions of the defences still to update. However, the artist has no doubt when calling *arx nova* (new work) to the new additions and *art vetus* (old work) to the former. Boytac would return to North Africa I 1514 to evaluate, to measure and to write down the works in a report.

Even if the report was mainly focused on the military architectural construction[11], what happened inside the walls was also relevant. Besides, it acknowledges that the works went clearly beyond the original indications and a housing program was taking place to replace all the houses destroyed upon the 1508 Arab assault. The idea of a new plan for the Portuguese town is never openly mentioned but several evidences concur for the establishment of a new town grid scheme over the devastated area. Among them are coeval references to the 'old town' versus 'new town'. Like in Braun's picture, the excluded part of Islamic Asilah seems entirely erased from ancient representations, whereas the Portuguese nucleus appears filled with constructions, probably reflecting more of a wish than the real situation.
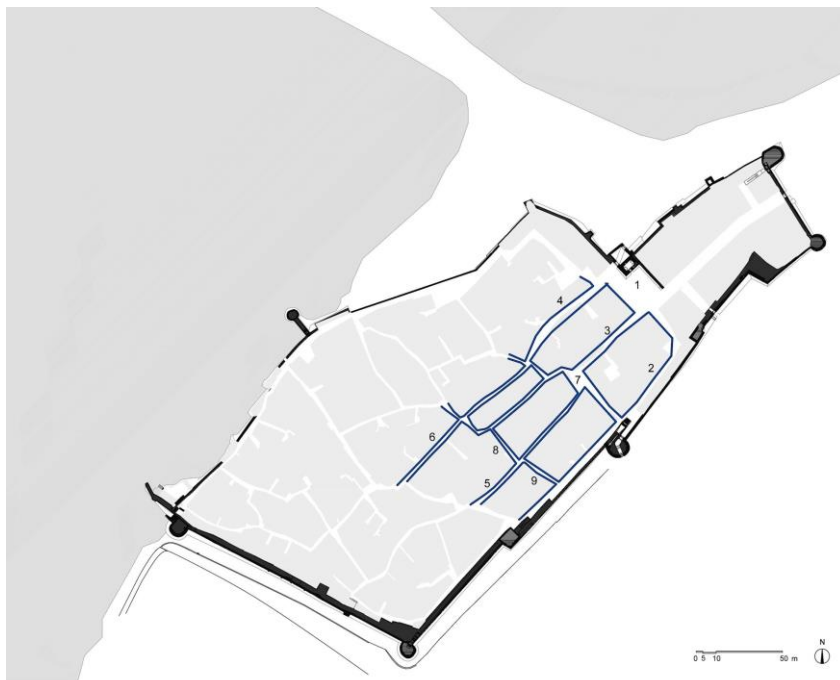

Figure 4. Asilah: reconstitution of the Portuguese urban fabric

Several blocks with a high propensity for geometrical rectangular shapes were formed between the castle, the sea gate and the town gate. (Figure 4) They were divided by streets perpendicular and parallel to the main square, next to the donjon, and to the walls of the town. Roughly, these oblong blocks presented 28 to 30 brasses (around 62 to 66 meters) in length and a ratio of a half or a third for the width. They were encircled by a street running along the wall for military displacement purposes and structured around the *rua Direita*, the traditional spine of Portuguese medieval cities[12], which in this case

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[11] *História das Fortificações Portuguesas no Mundo*, 1989, p. 124.
[12] For further details on medieval Portuguese cities, see: Trindade, 2009.

can be attributed to either *Tijara, Sidi Ali Ben Handouch* or *Bab R'Mel* streets. The report reinforces the rational spirit of the intervention when mentioning the care devoted to street pavement and water supply through a public fountain.

Urban morphology methodologies allow retrospective keys to the reading of an important urban clash occurred in the early 1500s that still marks Asilah's present dimension, street display and touristic dynamic. Less than eight decades of Portuguese presence in Asilah were enough for the establishment of instruments of regular urbanism that still mark the city's present dimension and street display more than four and a half centuries after the Islamic reoccupation. The central core of the early-XVIth century Portuguese urban action was completed afterwards by a less regular fabric that today covers all the historical medina. Furthermore, the original blocks saw their limits invaded by dead-end streets or cul-de-sacs, called *derb*, a distinctive mark of Islamic urbanism that privileges privacy and intimacy patterns.

Conclusion

Despite centuries of Arab-Islamic re-occupation and the scarceness of cartographical documents to trace back the Portuguese urban settlement layer, methodologies making use of morphological analysis allow retrospective keys to the reading of important urban clashes occurred from mid 1400s till the early 1500s that still mark these cities' present shape and street display.

The interpretation of contemporary Islamic tissues, in order to identify early-modern Portuguese urban signs in a retrospective approach, fosters the recognition of patterns that show a clash between instruments of urban regulation and traditional ways of assembling dwellings. Whereas the former are related to central mechanisms of ruling the public space, even if locally assessed, resulting in basic street-sketching by alignment of houses and allowing open spaces, the latter puts the focus on individual initiative and rights over the general image of the built environment. Therefore for Northern Africa, Portuguese urban traces can be detected by identifying linearity in fabrics that result from the application of traditional Islamic urban laws. Two dead-end cul-de-sacs that once formed a single street or narrow plots amidst Arab court houses that block an ancient passage are just two examples of how urban reading can be processed in order to reconstitute urban morphologies in cases where cartography is almost absent. Furthermore, methodologies such as these provide important data for the identification of different, sometimes concurrent, strata in specific hybrid tissues as the ones of some coastal Moroccan cities today.

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