

Book review / Comptes rendus

Bénédicte Florin, Anna Madoeuf, Olivier Sanmartin, Romand Stadnicki et Florence Troin eds. (2020), *Abécédaire de la ville au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient*. Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais (PUFR), 428 pp., 23 maps., ISBN: 978-2-86906-750-9 (hardcover).

An abecedary is a hornbook, a book that serves as primer for the study of a topic. In traditional European children's education, hornbooks typically introduce children to the letters of the Latin alphabet ranked alphabetically, featuring on each page a word beginning with that letter, a pleasing calligraphy of the word and an attractive illustration. Hornbooks could be thematic, for example, organized around the names of animals.

Abecedaries may also introduce key concepts about a specific subject. In French, contemporary abecedaries are often introductions to an issue and topic, generally meant for a broad readership.

In this Abecedary of the city in the Maghreb and the Middle East, the team of French geographers, based in the main at the University of Tours (home to the research laboratory URBAMA 1977-2004), provide an engaging introduction to the urban geography of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Entries are ranked alphabetically, as in a dictionary. Content is not limited to one entry for each letter (as a selection of the most relevant concept regarding the topic) as in an abecedary proper, but is less exhaustive than a full-fledged dictionary would be. The selection of entries remains more playful and perhaps to some extent even random.

Yet this volume presents a significant introduction to the geography of Arab cities. It contains 42 entries related to specific cities and 64 thematic entries. Moreover, 40 shorter entries deal with novels, movies, events or emblematic places. The book is richly illustrated with 23 city maps, original drawings by Fabienne Stadnicka and some 150 photographs (many by the contributors).

The 99 contributors are for the most part geographers, although numerous other disciplines (sociology, history, architecture and urban planning, anthropology, demography, political science and economics) are amply represented. Most are affiliated with different French universities (a large contingent is from Université de Tours) and French research institutions in France (with a larger contingent from the CNRS) and abroad. There is a substantial contingent from the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (IFPO – the French Institute for the Near East,

with branches in Beirut, Aleppo, Damascus, Amman, Erbil and the Palestinian Territories), and also academics based in Arab countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon) and Turkey. There are likewise some contributors from beyond the region under consideration, most notably from Italy, but also from Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States, as well as a small number of independent scholars.

As always in such an exercise, the selection of the entries is open to dispute (a map with an overview of the cities included is provided on p. 8). Difficult to understand is the absence of important cities such as Marrakech, Constantine or Izmir, and there are no entries for ancient cities such as Carthage, Byblos or Babylon.

The thematic entries deal with very spatial characteristics of cities, ranging from airports and urban agriculture to new towns and free zones (zones franches) via graveyards, malls, medinas, mosques, but also walls and borders, camps, gardens, social housing, transport and urban mobilisations. A few entries are more general, dealing with entrepreneurs, youth, demographic transition and transnational trade.

The volume also contains a consolidated bibliography (French and English) (pp. 393-422), an index (unfortunately limited to the listing of the entries) and a table of the photographs with details on the location, date and photographer.

The presentation is very pleasant, with short texts written in an accessible style, illustrated with maps, drawings and photographs. For a more academic readership, it is a pity that the entries generally lack detailed referencing and that precise information contextualizing the photos is not given directly in the caption. Figures and tables would likewise have been expected with more detailed, comparative data for several entries.

The maps are very informative but unfortunately not systematic. From an urban geographical point of view, it is strange to provide a map of Abu Dhabi but not of Dubai, one of Rabat but not Casablanca, one of Jerusalem but not of Tel Aviv, etc. The rationale seems to be that maps are only included for capital cities (although there is one for Tripoli in Lebanon). The colour maps provide insightful information about the general morphology of these cities and the main landmarks, albeit always including ministries.

The most innovative entries are the shorter pieces about a specific event or a work of fiction. Several city entries are supplemented by an entry on a noteworthy movie, such as *Taxi*, the Iranian docu-fiction by Jafa Panahi (2015), awarded the Golden Bear in 2015, (*Homeland: Irak Year Zéro*), a Franco-Iraqi documentary by Abbas Fahdel (2016) about Baghdad, and *Wajib (Duty)*, a Palestinian road movie by Annemarie Jacir (2017) about Nazareth, to complement the entries on Tehran, Baghdad

and Ramallah respectively. The entry about Istanbul is likewise supplemented by an entry on *Istanbul: Memories and the City, İstanbul: Hatıralar ve Şehir* (2003 [Turkish], 2005 in English), the non-fiction work by the Nobel Prize recipient Orhan Pamuk. Other publications range from Orientalist takes (a text about *Tintin and the Maghreb oriental city* discussing the strip album *Le crabe aux pinces d'or* (1941, translated into English as *The Crab with the Golden Claws* in 1958) to complement the entry on medinas. *L'allumeur des rêves berbères* (a pun about the lamp-lighter [allumeur de réverbères]), *The Lighter of Berber Dreams (rêves berbères)*, is a novel in French by the Beberophone, Arabophone and Francophone Algerian humourist and writer Mohamed Fellag published in Paris in 2007 to supplement the entry about energy. There is also a novel about the 2011 Egyptian revolution by the Egyptian writer Alaa El Aswany جمهورية كان (Ġumhūriyyaī ka'anna, [The Republic], 2018), published in French as *J'ai couru vers le Nil* (2018) to complement the entry on the Arab Springs. The book has been banned in Egypt and most of the Arab World (apart from Morocco, Lebanon and Tunisia) and the author had to leave Egypt to flee persecution and now lives in the U.S.A. To my knowledge, the English translation *The Republic of False Truths* is scheduled to be published in April 2021),

Overall, the *Abécédaire* is a timely reference book on the cities of the Middle East and North Africa that should be recommended for its breadth, balanced geographical and thematic coverage and accessibility. The chosen form is an invitation to browse through the entries and read them in random order so as to become acquainted with the cities and the main urban challenges in the region in an associative way. It is definitely an asset for neophytes, but also of interest to specialists, since it offers an informed account of the current state of research on MENA cities and their recent evolution. English and Arabic translations would be most welcome.

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