Walter L. Roberts of Pittsburgh suggest practices of distinction. Then there were those in government jobs, with or without civil service protection, as specialists in technical matters, housing, or, in one case, planning in developing countries. Black architects took on the same range of tasks that white architects did, of course, but in this book they have the historian’s notice.

There are, be forewarned, errors aplenty. Lawrence Reese’s (or Reece’s) name flips repeatedly throughout his entry. Richard L. Brown’s biographer needs to learn some basic architectural history. (Howells and Stokes were based in New York, not Seattle, and there is no way that “Louis eighteenth-century” describes the building shown [82].) And I was mighty surprised to learn that an undergraduate paper read seven or so years ago had morphed into a “Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1990” (239).

But I hope that readers will overlook such gaffes in favor of the compendium’s many virtues. The essays have a consistent narrative pace and an even tone in part because, like obituaries, the authors go through each life—birth, parentage, siblings, education, marriage, children, career(s), and death (naming parentage, siblings, education, marriage, funeral church and burial ground)—in a way that evokes the social matrix from which talent emerged. The result is engaging reading that shades our understanding in telling detail.

_African American Architects_ invites further research, and it suggests the boundaries of its kind of summarizing, dictionary history, which lack the conceptual scope to address the ever-nagging contemporary question: why, given the historical record of talent, determination, effort, and achievement collected in this volume are there so few black architects working today?

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Nicholas Warner
_The True Description of Cairo: A Sixteenth-Century Venetian View_

In January 1383, Ibn Khaldun, the great Arab historian, arrived in Cairo from Tunis. His reaction to the city, often quoted, captures the sentiment of an era. He wrote, “I beheld the metropolis of the world, garden of the universe, hive of nations, iwan of Islam, throne of royalty, bursting with palaces and iwans within, shining on the horizon with _khanaqahs_ and _madrasas_, illuminated by the moons and stars of its learned scholars, which appeared on the bank of the Nile, river of Paradise, flowing with the waters of the sky.” Many medieval scholars similarly wax lyrical about Cairo’s vast expanse, diverse population, and architectural splendor. Some, like Ibn Shaddad (thirteenth century), Ibn Duqmaq and al-Maqrizi (fourteenth–fifteenth century), and Abu Hamid al-Qudsi (late fifteenth century), show a genuine interest in the form of the city and sometimes even an expert handling of its particular architectural and spatial qualities; in fact, each of them makes buildings the backbone of one key book in his historical oeuvre. But, like their predecessors and their successors until the nineteenth century, they never provide any graphic representation of the city they are describing or of its major monuments.

Thus, there is no exaggerating the importance of the rare images of Cairo that came down to us from Renaissance Europe, especially those like the mid-sixteenth-century map and views printed by Matteo Pagano, _La vera descrizione de la gran cita del Cairo_, that seem to have paid special attention to fullness of representation. These maps provide a relatively contemporary and more or less complementary visual counterpart to the myriad urban and architectural nuggets preserved in Arabic historical treatises. They also reveal how premodern Western visitors perceived the medieval city, which, contrary to the frequent assertions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, has changed significantly since then. In fact, it is only with the evidence of these maps that we can begin to loosen the grip of the plan of Cairo rendered by the savants of the Napoleonic _Expedition d’Égypte_ (1798–1801) on our imagining of the medieval metropolis and to challenge its habitual use as a base map for any historic reconstruction today.

These are two of the main reasons why Nicholas Warner’s study of Pagano’s map, _The True Description of Cairo_, is such a welcome event. Another, and perhaps a more palpable one, is the sheer beauty of this monumental wall-sized image (measuring 6½ by 3½ feet, on twenty-one sheets). A fourth is that this view printed in or before 1549, but seemingly depicting Cairo as it stood towards the end of the Mamluk period in the 1490s, is the earliest surviving Renaissance view of the city in the aerial oblique mode. A fifth reason, which concerns us most here, is the meticulous care Warner has expounded in depicting and analyzing every single detail in the map or associated with it and in comparing it to every known map of Cairo and other neighboring cities from that period. They are all lavishly printed and their features reproduced and evaluated. Here though, acknowledgment has to go to the publisher as well, the Arcadian Library of London, which spared no expenses in printing this stunning three-volume study of the map and its context. Despite its steep price, the publication, which is the second in a new series, speaks for itself as a wonderful fulfillment of the library’s mission to “promote the cultural transfer between the Levant and Europe through exhibition and through publication.”

In the last twenty years, Warner has systematically and passionately immersed himself in the study of the topography of...
Islamic Cairo. In 2005, he published The Monuments of Historic Cairo: A Map and Descriptive Catalogue, in which he mapped the historic city as thirty-one section-maps and described its remaining monuments in painstaking detail. He also outlined the evolution of cartographic and ideal representations of Cairo from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.

In some ways, then, the publication of The True Description of Cairo is a logical continuation of and an analytical expansion on The Monuments of Historic Cairo. It is also an assertion of an intellectual lineage to which Warner—perhaps sub-consciously and, it should be admitted, deservedly—feels heir. But this should not distract us from the tremendous merits of the book as a scholarly tour de force that sets a very high bar for any future cartographic studies not only of Cairo, but also of any premodern city that had the good fortune of being a subject of repeated depictions. In fact, very few researchers today possess the variety of linguistic, historical, architectural, and literary skills required to produce such a study, which Warner demonstrably enjoys.

The first volume of the True Description of Cairo sets the map in its various historical contexts. It begins with the long view of city representation encompassing all the known images of Cairo prior to Pagano’s map in both European and Islamic traditions, but it focuses especially on the little-known eyewitness view of the Italian pilgrim Brocardo made in 1556 and the famous Ottoman plan of Piri Reis (1521). The next chapter examines the various individuals responsible for the production of Pagano’s map, providing their biographies and tracking down their methods and sources. It then moves to examine the representational qualities of the map by comparing it to the maps of Brocardo and Piri Reis. Here Warner identifies the graphic standards employed in rendering the topography of the city and its architecture, especially its mosques and houses, whose depictions carry some indication of first-hand observation mixed with conventional references. Chapter three looks at the production and consumption of printed images of Islamic cities in the context of Renaissance Italy. It is a serious, even sober, analysis of a cross-cultural representational tradition that manages to avoid the kind of superficial criticism that we sometime encounter in similar reviews of the history of the East–West cultural divide. A first appendix literally illustrates the paradigmatic role that the La vera descritione de la gran cita del Cairo played in the two centuries after its publication by reproducing every known map that took its cues from it, including its exaggerated perspectival alterations. A second appendix reveals a tad of scholarly pride on Warner’s part, for he reprints an important letter by the pilgrim Brocardo in the original Italian without a translation.

The second volume contains the translation of and copious commentary on the third chapter of the map’s accompanying pamphlet, Descriptio Alcahirae, which is inconclusively attributed to the famous French philologist, historian, Orientalist, and Christian millenarian Guillaume Postel (1510–81). The first and second chapters of the pamphlet, reproduced in facsimile but not fully translated, deal with the origin of Islam and Cairo. Although they do not bear directly on the validity and veracity of the third chapter’s content, they nevertheless offer the contemporary reader a powerful reminder of the biases and twists in the knowledge of the Orient among Renaissance humanists. Notwithstanding the fact that Postel was a special kind of scholar, who was able to read Arabic and many other “Oriental” languages, he—like most contemporaneous European commentators on Islam and the Orient—oscillated in his comments between received myths and some historical specifics that percolated into the European consciousness during the period of the Crusades (eleventh through thirteenth century). All is aimed to prove the superiority of Christianity in an age when facts, like the military ascendency of the Ottomans during the sixteenth century, did not make that superiority self-evident.

The third chapter of the Descriptio Alcahirae, a running commentary by Postel on the thirty-four legends on the map itself, is the true core of Warner’s study and is translated in its entirety. Here Warner gives free reign to his erudition about Cairo and its history. He cites, corrects, compares, and contextually sees the content of every vignette of Postel and then moves on to add thirty-two of his own commentaries on details of the map that are not demarcated by any legends or commented upon by Postel. Postel, who apparently never visited Cairo, must have depended for his information, like Pagan and his cartographer Alessandro Zorzi, on multiple sources of diverse provenance and varied relevance including maps, sketches, travelers’ accounts, classical historical treatises, and probably the Holy Book. Warner uncovers many of these sources and highlights some of their main strengths and weaknesses. Unsurprisingly, one of the most important and most rigorous among them is Leo Africanus (also known as al-Hasan bin Muhammad al-Wazzan), whose Description of Africa was the main reference on the continent throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Interestingly, Leo’s text, which was composed in 1526, had not yet been published when Postel made use of it; Warner postulates that a known manuscript of Leo’s text might have been the one used by Postel.

Volume three consists solely of a folded and boxed facsimile of Pagano’s map in full scale on heavy paper. This unmistakably hints at putting the reproduction to the same use the original was intended for: a magnificent wall map. notwithstanding its many emissions and misrepresentations, its plethora of textual and visual sources, and its accommodation of various conventions of illustration (anecdotal snapshots, exotic and imaginary details, and divergent perspectives), the map still exudes a strong sense of purposeful comprehensiveness that until that point in time was achieved only by copious texts such as the famous Kitab al-Mawa’iz wa-l-I’tibar bi-Dhikr al-Khitat wa-l-Atbar (The Book of Moral Sermons...
and Lessons derived from the Remembrance of Cities’ Traces and Building Remains) of Taqīy al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442), the largest and most elaborate medieval repository of topographic and historical information on Cairo. In fact, Warner’s analysis of the map and the intentional distortions effaced in its production to provide full views of the details deemed important by its authors show how analogous the aims of city descriptions were on the two sides of the Mediterranean despite the otherwise dissimilar methods and techniques of representation.

Nor does cartographic representation prove itself less prone to individual agendas and cultural predispositions than textual description. With the advances in precision of capturing and reproducing images, perspective, in more senses than implied by our particular architectural use of the word, was and still is the crucial factor in city representation, whether it is in words, images, or a combination of the two. By conflating his perspective (and those of his multiple sources) on every aspect of Pagano’s map with that of the author of the original comments, Warner sensibly tries to avoid the tyranny of the single vantage point.

Richard Yeomans’s The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo shares with Warner’s book its subject of admiration, Cairo, albeit in an explicitly romanticized way. It is, however, a traditional survey book written and beautifully illustrated expressly for laypeople. In that task, Yeomans’s text succeeds. It might also appeal to the undergraduate student looking for an easy introduction to the wealth of objects and buildings associated with (a strictly defined) Islamic Cairo, especially as the author states in the introduction that his purpose was to bring together the vast extant scholarship on the subject in one convenient volume. Yet, Yeomans’s sources are mostly general books aimed at the student, giving the impression that his study is essentially a synthesis of syntheses—in other words, tertiary literature. This impression is confirmed as one delves into the text and examines the architectural drawings, all of which lack scale, which renders them useless for any student of architecture.

The book is openly modeled after the most popular surveys of Islamic art and architecture, The Art and Architecture of Islam 650–1250 and The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800, two volumes in the History of Art series published initially by Pelican and edited by Nikolaus Pevsner and later acquired by Yale University Press. Like them, it conventionally follows a chronological order and a periodicization. Like them, too, it gives priority to architecture: every two chapters dealing with architecture are followed by a chapter summarizing the art produced during the same time frame. The exception is the last chapter “The Architecture of the Burji Period,” with which the book inexplicably ends without any presentation of Burji Art despite the fact that the art of this second Mamluk period (1382–1517) is simply dazzling, especially its metalwork, textile, and calligraphy. Moreover, Yeomans tacitly accepts the assumption underlying most general studies of Islamic architecture that sees it as a self-contained and seemingly endogenous tradition that began with the building of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina around 620 CE and inexplicably fizzle out with the dawn of the colonial age in the late eighteenth century, when the Islamic world is supposed to have become inextricably dominated by the victorious Western culture and ceased to be creative on its own. Yeomans actually pushes the onset of decline in Cairo back to the arrival of the Ottomans (1517), who according to him reduced Egypt to a provincial status and produced only minor monuments. Not even the mighty Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha (1805–48), who modernized and invigorated Egypt, is worth the sustained attention of Yeomans, who actually calls his great mosque at the Citadel “un-Islamic” and “barbarous.” In fact, no neo-Islamic building of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century is even mentioned. In the rigid chronological enframing of Islamic Cairo, these architectural works all fall into the chaos of the modern period.

Thirteen years ago, I concluded a review essay on the study of the history of Islamic architecture in Cairo in the defunct and truly missed Design Book Review by noting that “the history of Cairene architecture still awaits a critical treatment that presents architecture as a product of culture, history, and environment; that pursues explanations of historical phenomena beyond set boundaries; and that challenges the discipline of architectural history to integrate what has been left out in the continuous project of rewriting the history of architecture.”1 Since then, many publications have further enriched our knowledge of the architecture of Cairo and opened its accomplishments to a wide reading (or—as the new trend in lavishly illustrated books indicates—viewing).2 But The Art and Architecture of Islamic Cairo has not managed to escape the bewitching confines of an insular but easily mastered context and a clear linear chronology to explore the city’s varied architectural entanglements with the world from its foundation in the tenth century until today. Architectural history remains the poorer without that kind of study.

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Notes
2. Quote taken from book jacket.
4. For lavishly illustrated books and films, see especially Henri and Anne Sterlin, Splendours of an Islamic World: The Art and Architecture of the Mamluks (London, 1997); Gray Henry and Caroline Williams, Cairo: 1001 Years of Islamic Art and Architecture, four-part video series (Louisville, Ky., nd); Agnieszka Dobrowolska, The Living Stones of Cairo (Cairo, 2003), and Elizabeth Fermor and Marysoon Pachachi, Living With The Past: Historic Cairo (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2001).