

Political Landscapes of Capital Cities

Edited by Jessica Joyce Christie, Jelena Bogdanović, and Eulogio Guzmán. Pp. xvii + 406, figs. 100. University Press of Colorado, Boulder 2016. \$85. ISBN 978-1-60732-468-3 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Thomas E. Emerson](#)

Political Landscapes of Capital Cities is a project by architectural and art historians examining how such landscapes are created, manipulated, and contested across space and time. The editors explicitly derive inspiration from Smith's *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities* (Berkeley 2003). In their introduction, they provide a lengthy assessment of Smith's theoretical stance, an unequivocal rejection of sociopolitical evolutionary stages (e.g., tribes, chiefdoms, states) used to classify historical political developments. Building on earlier scholarly work that posited the social construction of space (e.g., Henri Lefebvre), Smith contended that political authority should be examined through the medium of political landscapes that direct human experience, perception, and imagination. Today, scholars would characterize such relationships in terms of relational ontologies and describe them as operationalized through meshworks, networks, entanglements, or other-than-human agency. For archaeologists and anthropologists, given the subsequent theoretical deliberations, Smith's concepts form a somewhat outdated foundation from which to initiate current studies of the intertwined and recursive relationships of human behavior and the built and natural landscapes.

The volume includes 10 chapters concerning capitals around the world within a chronological framework that reaches from pharaonic Egypt (ca. 1300s B.C.E.) to modern Tehran. With the exception of the first millennium B.C.E. Andean site of Tiwanaku, all the cities discussed have a rich body of evidence, including written texts, public inscriptions, symbolic art, monumental dedications, maps and graphic depictions, oral histories, and identifiable elite rulers. A dependence on literary evidence structures many of the analyses and contributes a certain emic perspective that can only be surmised when studying cities with nonliterate populations. This difference is most clearly demonstrated when one compares these studies with Vranich's analysis of Tiwanaku (ch. 5), which depends heavily on a phenomenological approach supplemented by later, deeply structured Andean ethnohistoric and ethnographic concepts of landscapes.

The presence of written documents and identified elite builders, of course, can lend itself to connotations of "great men" and create seemingly functionalist scenarios. Thus, we can read of the intentions of Pharaoh Akhenaten, King Rama I, Mussolini, Inca Pachacutec, or the Roman tetrarchs to mold political, social, and religious behavior. To some extent, we can attribute this personalization as a convenient shorthand for the responsible cluster of sociopolitical religious elites who were instrumental in the planning and performance of the documented actions. What is generally missing from these discussions is any sense of the "people" and the recursive role of human social action. There is very little analysis of social resistance, although the chapters on Tehran (Grigor, ch. 10) and the Italian provincial capital of Matera (Toxey, ch. 8) directly examine the interplay of ruler and ruled and, to some extent, so does the analysis of the Fascist reorganization of Rome (Pilat, ch. 9).

In some cases, surviving texts can detail the "creator's" goals. For example, Christie (ch. 1) is able to compare Pharaoh Akhenaten's visions (as stated in monument inscriptions) to form a ritual landscape on the empty plain of Amarna using architectural and natural landscapes. The use of space to create a new image or to capture a past one is documented in several of this book's chapters. Bogdanović (ch. 3) details the creation of a Christian spiritual geography overlaying the space of Roman Constantinople and the subsequent emulation of this new Christian Byzantine georeligious landscape by the capitals of evolving states to the west. The desire of elites to acquire the powers of historical predecessors is clearly demonstrated by King Rama I, who constructed Bangkok in imitation of the destroyed city of Ayutthaya. This symbolic connection was reinforced by employing bricks from the latter in the construction of Bangkok's monuments (Rod-ari, ch. 4). Rama I not only employed emulation to empower his new regime, he also erased historical memory by physically eliminating all traces of Thonburi, the capital of his deposed predecessor.

The contributors understand that landscapes are not immutable—human actions, beliefs, perceptions, and imagination can transform the seemingly static power of both built and natural landscapes. Grigor (ch. 10) documents the transformation of central Tehran by the elites to further their goals of modernizing and westernizing Tehran—but with the inadvertent effect of augmenting severe economic and religious differences that served as an impetus to revolution. The historical transformation of Matera's social landscape through economic, social, and political changes, despite the continuity of the physical setting, is

also a powerful reminder of the recursive nature of humans and landscape (Toxey, ch. 8). The Aztecs drew on a mythic founding history to create the ritually charged center of Tenochtitlán and reified their power and dominance through periodic rebuildings of the Templo Mayor. Ultimately, however, they were unsuccessful in imposing that vision on the surrounding populations (Guzmán, ch. 7). Political landscapes can fail.

Political Landscapes of Capital Cities is a series of case studies meant to explore the recursive relationship of society, the built environment, and the natural landscape, and it is suitable for a broad audience, including nonarchaeologists. Nevertheless, archaeologists who study urbanization will find many familiar themes in these case studies, including the process of founding a new city or rebuilding an existing city as an integral part of regime change; the relocation of elites to a new landscape (a tabula rasa) to promote their spatial visions; the emplacement of a cosmic diagram in built earthly form to add spiritual empowerment to a city; and the use of emulation and erasure of the built world to modify human perception. While not theoretically innovative, the volume's authors, employing Smith's concepts linking human behavior with space, weave a series of fascinating histories concerning the interplay of political power, social and economic forces, and the built and natural environments. This volume is an excellent introduction to the consideration of the complex and recursive interrelationships of the built and natural worlds seen through the lens of human power—issues that humans have been grappling with for thousands of years.

Thomas E. Emerson
Illinois State Archaeological Survey
University of Illinois
teee@illinois.edu

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