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The Architecture of Mercantilism: Staging and Displaying Exchange, 1100-1800

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Paper

Early 16th century mercantile structures in Northern Africa: the Portuguese city of *Safim*

Introduction

Both shores of the Strait of Gibraltar share a long past of social, military and cultural interactivity between north and south (Figure 1). In 1415 Portugal initiated its Overseas Expansion. The conquest of Ceuta began a settling process that comprised several towns in Northern Africa which would last until 1769, with the evacuation of *Mazagão*. Beyond the evident economical and commercial benefits, Europe's recognition and religious Reconquest were also aimed.

All seizures and foundations are placed in a territory that corresponds nowadays to the Kingdom of Morocco, along the Atlantic and Strait of Gibraltar coasts. The domination consisted on fortified and isolated settlements punctuating the shore, which revealed a huge difficulty in penetrating to the hinterland, towards cities as Fez or Marrakesh, capitals then. One can speak of two kinds of establishment in the territory: conquest and foundation. The conquest was a much advantageous process to Portugal, not only for providing an existing urban and commercial fabric, but also for the average duration of these possessions¹: Ceuta (1415-1640), Qsar es-Seghir (Alcácer Ceguer) (1458-1550), Tangier (Tânger) (1471-1661), Asyilah (Arzila) (1471-1550), in the north. Late 15th century brought three suzerainties in the southern stretch of Moroccan coastline to the Portuguese crown in exchange for the establishment of a factory in those Muslim towns. Soon, the increasing commercial advantages lead to the conquest of Azamor (Azemmour) and Safim (Safi) by Manuel I.

Until the middle of the 16th century the settling was mainly made over the pre-existent Islamic fabric. When the Portuguese took over former Islamic cities, the collision of a new situation was produced at various levels: surface dimension, military and public architecture and street system. On the one hand, the impact of some public buildings, such as churches, charitable institutions or administrative headquarters, implied a street-layout revision, which sought standardization and regularity. Significant reductions in the perimeter and in the occupied area's surface were made, in a procedure known as *atalho* (downsizing). Showing a deeply rational spirit, this technique encloses the most important instrument of appropriation used by the Portuguese in Northern Africa conquests. Carrying a significant contribution to the

¹ For cities and towns, we decided to use the present denominations for the toponyms of the former Portuguese possessions. The original Portuguese names are indicated in brackets.

evolution of fortification systems, these processes led to a radical analysis of the appropriated cities, re-evaluating their internal disposition, regularizing them geometrically and putting them closer to the maritime channel.

These early 16th century conquests and occupational *praxis* over pre-existent Islamic fabrics implied a re-evaluation of the mercantile structures. In the vicinity of the port new buildings were erected in order to respond to a developing market of exchanges between Europe, Northern African reigns and the Sahara caravans - the customs, the exchequer or the mint. First of all, it is important to determine graphically the exact localisation of the custom house, the exchequer or the mint in both cases, either through coeval iconography engraved by Braun or local letters to the crown.

Azzemour (Azamor)

On the left bank of river Oum er Rebia, close to its mouth, Azemmour soon suffered from accessibility problems during the dry season. The need of getting a sustainable place quickly came into mind after the 1513 conquest.

The decision and building of the *atalho* is well documented since the earliest years of Portuguese presence². Sustained by new bastions, the reduced area, called *castelo* (castle) covered just 29% of the Muslim medina. It remained large enough and the king ordered that the whole population should be established there, houses should be built for that purpose and streets drawn. The stretched figure along the river was shortened to a northern quadrangular by a new curtain of wall divided by the Town gate. To the interior, next to it, the church was settled over the former mosque and a fresh captain house was erected. From the in between square, *rua Direita* led to the river gate (*Porta da Ribeira*), sided by the customs and the factory, emerging as the main distributive access between the commercial and administrative centres.

Unfortunately, the sketches for the customs house are as lost as any remains of the building. It should have participated in the large urban plan for the new town of Azamor that the dynamic captain Simão Correia discussed with the king in 1516. Those ideas were certainly based upon the Arruda brothers' indications left when the master-builders were active in town a couple of years before. The whole process reached its highest point with the establishment of the *Regimento para allfamdega da cydade dezamor* in 1518. These rules of procedure, combined with the information from 1514, allows us to picture a two store structure, housing the custom in the ground floor and the factory along with a new exchequer in the first floor³. Here, the occupancy doesn't seem to cover all the low structure terraces, so a T or L façade shape is predictable towards the main street. As no more elements are given concerning the architecture display, one

² *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc*, première série, tome I, pp. 438-442.

³ “ (...) Quanto aas casas d'allfamdegua e feitoria e comtos que V. A. mandou dar, já se faz nellas o que V. A. manda, em que saeem pequenas pêra tudo e compriraa fazer-se huum sobrado emcima de hua açotea ssomente pêra os comtos e alfamdegua e feitoria se poderaa servir no baixo do amdar das casas, e isto veja Vossa alteza se haa por seu serviço. (...)” in *Les Sources Inédites de l'Histoire du Maroc*, première série, tome I, p. 580.

“(...) A nosa allfamdega desa cydade se faça no castello della na Casa que se pera jso fez que he debayxo da feitoria. (...)” in FAGUNDES, 1970, p. 149.

must turn to another case study, the city of Safim, some hundred miles south on the coast.

Safi (*Safim*)

The Muslim city had been under Portuguese suzerainty since 1488, when protection was asked by the local population to the Portuguese crown and the setting of a factory inside the walls was agreed in exchange. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine medieval Islamic Safi, before falling into Portuguese hands after the definite 1508 conquest. Its present morphological linearity denounces a deliberate intention of quickly joining the upper castle to the sea. In the northern part of the city, some evidence of the former wall is still present. The changes didn't reduce the length but cut short the surface and actual Safi occupies less than a half of its late medieval shape. Safi, together with Tangier in the north, consisted of two sites where the topography challenged this rational appropriation, confirm through a double *atalho* a change in the orientation of the city, cutting sprawling inland sections and opening the urban space to the harbour.

The communication system in the interior of the urban assemblage is still led by *rua Direita* (now, Rue des Marchés), connecting the port and beach to the gate of *Almedina* (Bab Chabah). Signs of perpendicularity and parallelism are originated by this street in the lower area, which accommodated the cathedral, Sainte Catherine's convent, the market, the port and the mercantile structures, while the upper city was centralized in the castle, former *kasbah*.

For Safi, it is possible to extend the study. New evidence based on a recently discovered sketch in the Portuguese National Archives (IAN-TT⁴) suggests a complete display of all three structures - the custom house, the exchequer and the mint. This paper attempts the reconstitution of the building, relying on both written and visual data, thus throwing some light on the architectural aspect of these central spaces of the Portuguese Expansion in Northern Africa.

In Safi, the former factory house, from where the decisive strike to the city had been taken by the Portuguese, was completely obsolete by 1510⁵. A new mercantile complex was proposed and its sketch suggested a complete display of all the structures around a patio called *Patim da Alfândega* (Customs Yard) accessible by the Customs Gate. Nuno Gato, *contador* (reckoner) then, planned this open air yard with a well in its centre as a distributive space for the enclosing constructions. In a 1516 letter that travelled together with the sketch to the King Manuel I in Lisbon, one learns about displays, volumes and materials. There should be one floor buildings for the mint, right opposite when entering at the Customs Gate, and for the custom storage. The arrival and departure merchandises should be housed in separate rooms, to the left and right of the yard, respectively. Moreover, a brand new exchequer with big cupboards was needed since the captain complained about the miserable conditions of the "hut" where it has been installed so far. Therefore, the plan previewed its erection over the Custom's Gate, on

⁴ IAN-TT: Instituto dos Arquivos Nacionais – Torre do Tombo, Lisboa.

⁵ *Apontamentos com várias coisas respeitantes a Safim*, Safim – June 15th, 1510? In AS GAVETAS da Torre do Tombo, 1960-1977, IV, pp. 202-204.

the first floor, containing two windows to the main street (*rua Direita*) and another one to the interior of the complex, over the yard, to check the commercial procedures. The whole work was supposed to be constructed on stone and lime, but due to the lack of the last, argil was integrated in the building system. Nevertheless, lime was still to be used in the reinforcement of the angles.

Through the letter and the sketch, one apprehends the exact localisation and dimensions of the ground where the project was about to be risen. It's a rectangle of 16 per 9 Portuguese *braça* (around 35 per 20 meters), having one of its long sides facing the main street. The Customs Gate was very close to the Sea Gate of Safi's walls, thus facilitating the transport of goods between port and its place of storage or accounting in the city.

Model ?

Since all the physical traces of the mercantile headquarters have been erased from former Portuguese possessions waterfronts in this territory, the rescue of Safi's customs house complex allows us to picture a possible model applied since Ceuta. This hypothesis of reconstitution enables us to rescue an image of an important mercantile complex built in a Portuguese city of Northern Africa. Following the Christian imperative that "commanded" the war against the unfaithful, some places could house a bishop, and therefore could be called a city (*cidade*), headquarter of a whole diocese. Town (*vila*) would be the denomination of the smaller parishes. Along with Safi, only Tangier and Ceuta could hold this urban status and, therefore, would probably house such a big and multi-programmatic structure around a courtyard. For smaller towns, such as Azemmour, the building would simply consist of a simple volume.

What seems clear is the absence of a strict program for the construction of these equipments in the Portuguese possessions in this territory. Taking into consideration that the beginning of the 16th century was the most important period of urban and military activity here, it would be expectable to watch the same attention turned to the commercial sector. So, if the initiative didn't start in Lisbon, it must have belonged to the men directly involved in the appropriation of the Muslim medinas in the first years after the occupation. Diogo de Arruda, the oldest brother who would be also present in Azemmour, appears as the most informed character to suggest the Customs typology. Nevertheless, the pragmatic attitude that had always characterized the settlement of the Portuguese over these inherited fabrics allows us to grant the energetic Nuno Gato, a relevant role in this process. The roughness of the sketch shows lack of drawing skills but a particular emphasis on the disposition of the spaces, indicating a military background.

The question of the authorship becomes secondary when compared to the significance of this model. Safi's custom house means the establishment of the courtyard typology as a fundamental part of the building catalogue for that time and region. Its inspiration must have come through memory, once the main investments had been occurring over quadrangular castles displayed around central military yards, including Safi's contemporary Sea Castle and other neighbouring fortifications such as Mazagão's manueline fort. The other influence could also have its origin in the Mediterranean

and/or Islamic architectural vocabulary legacy acquired when conquering urban assemblages in the Maghreb, where private houses gathered around patios were frequent.

The introduction of such an important building programme devoted to the mercantile activity calls the attention upon the crucial role that the southernmost Portuguese city in Northern Africa played, not only as the main anchor for the conquest of Marrakesh, a dream vanished soon after, but also as the chief port for expediting the country's busy trading routes.

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