

Power in the city:
Spaces, material cultures, and scenographies in Africa before the 20th century

Call for articles for a special issue of *Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire*
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Historians specializing in pre-20th-century Africa took a relatively late interest in the continent's cities – long after economists, sociologists, or geographers. For a long time, Africa's cities were considered from a uniquely contemporary standpoint and as a product of colonization. The development of a historical perspective began in the 1950s but accelerated in the 1990s (B. Davidson 1959; R. Hull 1976; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch 1993; D. Anderson and R. Rathbone 1999). Many other studies ensued, carried out in collaboration with different disciplines – archaeology in particular. They helped put a definite end to the image of Africa as a mainly rural continent with only few citified clusters making up urban societies. They also questioned the myths these towns had sometimes elicited, some of which still need to be deconstructed. Today, this research area seems well explored, but it still suffers from a relative lack of visibility compared with studies on contemporary cities. This special issue on continental and insular Africa (including North Africa) aims to discuss relations between urban territoriality and the exercise of power before the 20th century – excluding European-built cities – from an interdisciplinary standpoint, with particular reference to material culture and symbolic systems.

Long before the development of contemporary metropolises and capitals, the African continent included diverse urban formations with very variable temporalities, limits, and modes of functioning. One of the objectives of this issue of *Afriques* is to comprehend the set of urban phenomena – such as empire capitals, and major cities of kingdoms or city-states – with a view to considering their plurality in their own specific context and chronology made up of both periods of continuity and breaks with the past. Considering that the origin and development of cities are often the result of political, social, and economic rivalries and competition, the study of urban spaces cannot be envisaged without adopting a broader approach which takes into account relations with other cities.

In cities, political authorities aim to regulate social interactions, economic transactions, and religious and cultural life. They thus often contribute to shaping cities in material and symbolic terms and use them as a setting for representation to affirm their own legitimacy. To achieve this, the authorities use a multiple range of architectural interventions, visual representations, and ritual and ceremonial language and practices. Such ways of expression by the political sphere also testify to the perceptions and impressions of a city's stakeholders, including both inhabitants and visitors. These are all traces which still need to be studied and understood today.

Through a plurality of written, spoken, archaeological, visual, and artistic sources (which interested contributors are asked to describe in their abstracts) and by considering inter-regional and inter-continental transfers, we will be able to examine the places which incarnate political power (royal courts, religious buildings, public meeting places, markets, etc.) and the material and symbolic strategies adopted to stage – or dispute – the legitimacy and continuity of order. Urban contexts are in fact consistently inhabited by economic and migratory dynamics which tend to act as catalysts for potentially destabilizing transformation processes.

Urban materiality can also be seen as a space in which the social ambitions of both long-standing and recently arrived inhabitants are expressed and in which these inhabitants crystallize their social ideals, desires, and frustrations. These transform a city, a place for permanent appropriations which absorbs and adapts exogenous elements. In this way, we shall analyse urban landscapes as spaces whose stratified semantics result from conflicts and negotiations between a plurality of social groups and institutional stakeholders. Cities are a palimpsest of a particular genre and consequently are thus regularly redefined in spatial, visual, symbolical, and material terms.

Editors

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Deadline

Proposals for an article, in English or French, including the working title and a summary of about 500 words, should be sent to [glchouin\[@\]wm.edu](mailto:glchouin[@]wm.edu), [clelia.coret\[@\]gmail.com](mailto:clelia.coret[@]gmail.com), and [roberto.zaugg\[@\]unil.ch](mailto:roberto.zaugg[@]unil.ch) before the **31 January 2018**. The definitive articles should be ready by 30 November 2018.