

BOOK REVIEW

Reading Jerusalem

Review by Roberto Mazza

Yair Wallach. *A City in Fragments: Urban Text in Modern Jerusalem*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 344 pages. \$28.00, paper.



A CITY IN FRAGMENTS
Urban Text
in Modern Jerusalem
YAIR WALLACH

Abstract

This review critiques Yair Wallach's *A City in Fragments*, which attempts to collect and analyze the urban text of modern Jerusalem, covering the period from the 1850s to 1948. It explores how text in various forms shaped urban space and was used by authorities to create boundaries and facilitate encounters, focusing particularly on the transformation of Arabic and Hebrew as textual economies. Divided into eight chapters, (Stone, Dog, Gold, Paper, Ceramic, Wall, Cloth, and Cardboard), Roberto Mazza describes this book as groundbreaking in how it gives agency to items that in general have been considered accessories rather than agents of power, control, and conflict. He notes, however, that reading the texts from different perspectives can lead to disagreements with the author's interpretations. The book is an important addition to a wealth of literature on Jerusalem, but one that stands out among them by offering the possibility to look at Jerusalem from a material perspective.

Keywords

Language; text; urban space; governance; Ottomans; British mandate; currency; power; control; conflict.

According to the largest booksellers, every month of the year sees the publication of at least half a dozen books, in various languages, dedicated to Jerusalem. The fact is that many are nothing more than general and superficial

histories, while others serve the purpose to support political claims – or to deconstruct those claims. Obviously, there are many serious publications attempting to unpack what we do not know about the city of Jerusalem or to offer alternative interpretations. Guided by Walter Benjamin’s innovative principles of writing history from refuse, *A City in Fragments* by Yair Wallach is an attempt to collect and analyze the urban text of modern Jerusalem covering the period from the 1850s to 1948. Wallach brings together text in many forms: written, painted, carved, printed, and struck in gold: on paper money, cards, ceramics, stones, and signs. Analysis of text is not detached from the material, which Wallach also links to a transformation from orality to literacy. The book’s primary focus, however, is the transformation of Arabic and Hebrew as textual economies, in which text provided meaning to materials, which in turn were mobilized in the emerging Arab-Jewish struggle. In other words, Wallach seeks to explore how text, in various forms, shaped urban space and was used by authorities to create boundaries and facilitate encounters.

Wallach argues that urban text can be understood, in Derridian terms, as a supplementary element that completes, defines, and transforms artifacts, buildings, and people (7). Wallach also draws on Michel de Certeau, who adds that text, in its modern form, is a machinery at the service of colonialism and capitalism (10). While de Certeau argues that text serves power, Wallach shows that the same text can challenge that power. The last methodological pillar of this work is Benjamin, who was fascinated with fragments, small urban text like street names and signs, which he saw as tools open for reclaiming counter-hegemonic stories of the city and its people. Looking at the literature on Jerusalem discussing the late Ottoman and Mandate periods, *A City in Fragments* fits a current trend looking at the city from a multiplicity of viewpoints that shows the complexities of the relations between the communities sharing the same space. This work is also expanding the breath of sources used to write that history including objects and materials previously neglected. Wallach’s work is certainly groundbreaking as he gives agency to items that in general have been considered an accessory rather than agents of power, control, and conflict. To this extent the recent work of Frederik Meiton, *Electrical Palestine*, is quite similar in engaging with the study of electricity as a way of looking at the historical development of communal relations in Palestine. So is the work of Nimrod Ben Zeev published in *JQ 79* on the politics of cement.¹

The book is divided into eight chapters named after specific materials and objects. Chapter one (“Stone”) focuses on Arabic inscriptions in Jerusalem. Arabic was the language of the sacred Quran and it played a key role in providing religious legitimacy to the Ottoman rulers, and thus remained dominant over Ottoman Turkish even after centuries of Ottoman rule. Wallach notes (see map; 31) that Islamic inscriptions were concentrated around the Haram al-Sharif, which represented not just a sacred hub, but also the center where state, religion, public welfare, and commerce merged. The question of reading the text intersects with three developments: literacy, political changes, and urban developments. It is rather hard to know who and how many people were able to read and, more importantly, understand these texts, especially as many

are nearly illegible. Yet, Wallach tells us of an unusual reader, a Belarus-born Jewish journalist who wrote an article in 1865 reporting on the inscription of the Mamluk sabil of Qaytbay. After the 1908 coup, which brought the Young Turks into leadership positions, more Ottoman Turkish inscriptions were placed around Jerusalem, many promoting a nonsectarian Ottoman patriotism. The *tughra* – the monogram of the Ottoman dynasty – was printed and showcased everywhere as a way to show the authority of the state and the power of the text. At the same time, the Nahda, the intellectual movement that sought to revive and reinterpret Islamic and Arab heritage, manifested itself publicly in Jerusalem via signs, inscriptions, and publications that collided with the Ottoman state’s Turkification policies. The impact of these late nineteenth-century social and political changes are embodied at Jaffa Gate (Bab al-Khalil): in the 1870s, Jaffa Gate was adorned with only Arabic inscriptions, but by the 1890s, having become the secular hub of the modern city, it was plastered with signs in all possible languages. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Jaffa Gate became the site of struggle between Arab nationalism and Zionism in 1920 during the Nabi Musa riots.

The second chapter (“Dog”) looks at the spread of Hebrew text through Jerusalem. Inscriptions produced before World War I for the most part commemorated patrons of largely sacred institutions. As Hebrew went through a process of revival that was epitomized by the publication of Hebrew journals throughout Europe and also in Jerusalem, this revival transformed Hebrew from a sacred written language into a spoken and secular one. Wallach shows the battle between Orthodox Jews who advocated Hebrew as a sacred language, and Zionists who sought to make Hebrew a national language. The physical fragments of text discussed by Wallach show the shift from commemorative text to more common text such as commercial signs. Bringing to life *Stones of Memory*, a neglected work by the Jerusalemite Ben Tsvi Grayesvsky, which mapped Hebrew inscriptions at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wallach argues that the fact this book was left unused by Israeli historians of Jerusalem (84) shows who won the battle over Hebrew.

Chapters three (“Gold”) and four (“Paper”) go hand in hand as Wallach surveys money, first coins and then banknotes. In these chapters Wallach draws on John Maynard Keynes, who argued for a monetary system disassociated from gold. Wallach observes that coins used under the Ottomans were rarely inscribed with a value, but instead with inscriptions related to the authority who produced them. (In Jerusalem, a large number of coins from European countries circulated in addition to Ottoman coins.) Coins derived their value by the metal from which they were minted, while the value of bills was based on trust in their issuing authority. The author argues that the value of the Palestine Pound, introduced by the British in 1927, derived from its link to the Mandatory power, but also had power on its own as demonstrated by the analyses of the text and its reception by the Arabs and Zionists. While Wallach’s argument does not come through that clearly, it seems he understood the money-text impact not in economic terms but more in terms of language and its power given that the Palestine Pound had inscriptions in three languages, giving the name Palestine in English and

Arabic, but “the Land of Israel” (Eretz Yisra’el) in Hebrew. Zionists, unsurprisingly, celebrated the introduction of this currency, while Palestinians complained that the quality of the Arabic was poor. One, however, is left wondering about a general assessment of text-money in its economic and political value. Money was indeed an important tool in British authorities’ massive operation to revise and impose new forms of text in Palestine; however, as demonstrated by the following chapter, the British were not only introducing new text, but erasing the old.

Chapter five (“Ceramic”) presents the work of Ronald Storrs and the Pro-Jerusalem Society, which aimed at dressing Jerusalem in biblical clothes, preserving the Old City as a sort of open-air museum. Street naming offered the British a relatively cheap but powerful way to reshape the city. While people were used to the fact that streets had no or different names and certainly no building numbers, Jerusalemites continued to think about their urban environment in terms of familiarity with it. The arrival of European Jews who favored cherished street naming as an element of organized society, meant also the beginning of the erasure of Palestinian geography. For Zionists, street naming was part of appropriating the urban fabric of Jerusalem. Street naming was obviously entangled with the spread of Hebrew and the two together were harnessed to serve the Zionist cause, including the removal of earlier Jewish cultural memory not in line with the Zionist project.

Chapter six (“Wall”) tells the story of the Western Wall, where devout Jewish pilgrims left inscriptions – as they did at other Jewish holy places – as a form of reverence and veneration. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Western Wall was relatively full of such religious graffiti. Zionists viewed the wall as a place to redeem, to be transformed into a symbol of national revival instead of a symbol of ruin (171). After 1929, as the Zionist version of history and national culture became hegemonic, inscriptions on the Western Wall were slowly removed and prayer notes superseded the practice of graffiti. The story of the inscriptions’ removal is also the story of the secularization of Jewish life in Palestine and Jerusalem. This pattern is also visible in the story of the Nabi Musa banners, addressed in chapter seven (“Cloth”). The banners, part of a centuries-old tradition, featured prominently in the riots that took place in Jerusalem in 1920, and thus came to be seen by the British as potentially explosive textual objects. According to Wallach, the sacredness of the banners played a major role in the outbreak of the riots, more than other national symbols, and here he adds an important and previously neglected dimension to analysis of the event. (Despite this, Wallach’s bibliography and primary sources related to the riots are noticeably thin, considering the thorough scholarly attention they have received in recent years.) In a striking parallel to the Western Wall inscriptions, the banners were eventually superseded by the Arab flag, a non-textual symbol representing the idea of a secular state. Sadly, the Nabi Musa banners, along with the rivalries and connections among the various Palestinian cities, towns, and villages that carried them during the festival, have been largely forgotten.

Chapter eight (“Cardboard”) looks into visiting cards and identification papers and is, in fairness, the weakest chapter, feeling like a late addition. Wallach uses Mahmoud

Darwish's famous poem "Identity Card," which turned Israel's imposition of new identity documents following the Nakba in 1948 into a discourse on more deeply embedded, visceral forms of Palestinian identity. The reader may wonder, however, how this text relates to the identity papers issued during the British Mandate and the borders imposed on the Middle East after World War I.

The cumulative effect of the chapters discussed earlier is to answer the question how text shaped urban space. Wallach was able to demonstrate that text played a role in the creation of boundaries and in the facilitation of encounters, yet text is only one of the various components that shaped modern Jerusalem. Readers should also be aware that some forms of text are not analyzed in this work, like political notices or commercial advertisements, and that some historians may be critical of Wallach's work as at times his narrative is based on a thin body of literature and primary sources. While there are no controversial claims made by Wallach, it is the framework that may be problematic: text is constantly re-interpreted and it is rather hard to discuss the interpretation of text in a given historical period of time without thinking about what that text may or may have not produced. In other words, it is impossible to read that text without the insight of what happened next. On another note, disagreements with the author may come from those who have and will interpret the text presented here from different perspectives. For instance, those who look at the past with a sense of nostalgia may not appreciate the historical analyses presented here; so those who are seeing a textual analyses may be disappointed: Wallach is a sort of crumbs-collector not interested in bringing back the past nor on focusing on the text itself, but on the larger picture of urban text and its agency in the regulation of intercommunal relations. The narrative of this work is fresh and engaging; however the work has been in the making for quite a few years, possibly missing the opportunity to play an important role in the debate that followed the so-called National Law in Israel that essentially eliminated Arabic as an official language and gave it "special status" only.

Wallach reminds us that early twentieth-century Jerusalem is today simultaneously visible and absent. Erasure and replacement are a constant process, threatening Arab Jerusalem in particular. Wallach ends the book showing that contemporary text, whether Arabic or Hebrew, can be fully understood only in its historical context. Wallach's work is a refreshing effort, where urban text takes on its own agency in the context of the emerging Arab-Zionist conflict. Against the dozens of publications that will fill another shelf by the end of the year under the topic of Jerusalem, this is certainly one that scholars and the wider audience must be engaged with. This book offers the possibility to look at Jerusalem from a material perspective, one that speaks volumes about its history and those who lived and controlled the city. It is undeniable that text as a form of identification has been and is at the center of the contemporary conflict: this book opens an important window on Jerusalem as a central issue, beyond politics, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Nimrod Ben Zeev, "Building to Survive: The Politics of Cement in Mandate Palestine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 79 (Autumn 2019), online at www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1643033 (accessed 31 August 2020). See also Frederik Meiton, "Nation or Industry: The Non-Electrification of Nablus," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 80 (Winter 2019), online at www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1649527 (accessed 31 August 2020).