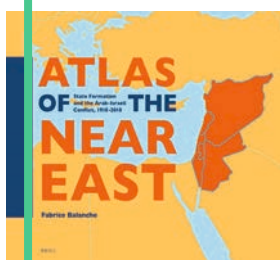


Rashomonic Rhapsodies in the Near East

Sebastian Musch



Reviewed title

Atlas of the Near East: State Formation and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1918-2010

Fabrice Balanche. 2017.

Leiden and Boston: Brill
ISBN 9789004344297

The Near East or Middle East, and especially the Israeli–Arab conflict, is rashomonic to its core, a web of contradictory narratives that are, more often than not, mutually exclusive. Too many justified claims populate the area – too many for a peaceful understanding and certainly too many to do justice to in one book.

It would, therefore, be an easy task to show that the author of this highly instructive atlas favours one narrative over another, is biased towards one actor, did not consider this or neglected that, etc. However, this would just display a misunderstanding of what the author aspired to do and even what a project like this atlas is capable of. Maps are intellectual tools, which allow us to see connections we have not previously considered and bring to light the internal logic of a narrative, as Franco Moretti in his

seminal *Atlas of the European Novel* (Verso, 1998) reminds us. So, what is the internal logic of the narrative presented by this author? It is one of a geopolitical area hamstrung by environmental factors like aridity and, due to the scarcity of resources, demographics. Population movement, migration, the urban–rural divide and consequent demographic pressure, have played and continue to play, according to the atlas, a decisive role in state formation in the Near East and the Israeli–Arab conflict. Since the atlas was already complete in 2011 and was first published (in French) in 2012, more recent developments (the civil war in Syria and subsequent waves of refugees heading to neighbouring countries and beyond, the rise and fall of ISIS, and re-emergence of the Kurdish question, to name but a few), which have transformed the region, are not featured in the atlas. This is unfortunate but not surprising and certainly

not the author's fault. The Near East has been, for most of the 20th and 21st centuries, in a state of flux, and any publication going beyond a historical analysis but aspiring to depict the present is almost doomed to be overtaken by events. However, this hardly diminishes the value of the work, especially the section on Syrian nation building, which offers key insights into the still raging civil war. As such, the atlas can contribute to our understanding of recent developments, even if it does not cover them.

A handy teaching tool

Furthermore, this is a beautifully designed book, multicoloured eye candy, even though its steep price will limit its wider distribution. The maps are, for the most part, beautifully executed, illuminating and rich in detail. There is much to discover here. Plus, for historians of the Near (or Middle) East, many of the maps would come in handy as teaching tools. The accompanying texts generally provide succinct information, allowing a newcomer to understand the context of the maps. Personally, I learnt a lot about environmental factors in the history of the region, many of which shine a fascinating new light on a wide array of contexts and caused me to reconsider foregone conclusions, especially regarding recent migration trends in the Near East. The atlas does a stellar job in highlighting the implications and ramifications for a large number of idiosyncratic contexts. However, the original French title, *Atlas du Proche-Orient arabe*, is much closer to its scope. While the Israeli–Arab conflict is sufficiently represented to justify its prominence in the English title of the atlas, it is striking that the atlas falls short on the Israeli side.

The place of Israeli space

Even aside from the question of the web of narratives that form a mental map of the Near Atlas, it is notable and regrettable that

Israel is only featured as a part of the hyphenated conflict. In the same vein, Zionism is here only featured as a foil, and the author is not interested in its history and different currents. Unsurprisingly, the author, more often than not, returns to quotes from Theodor Herzl to explain recent Israeli politics, a historically myopic choice. Furthermore, by separating Israel from the rest of the Near East according to its pre-'67 borders, referring to the Golan Heights as the Alsace-Lorraine of Syria, the author reinforces the notion of the Israeli state being a European spearhead, somehow separate from its Near Eastern surroundings. Yet, for various reasons, it can hardly be denied that the state of Israel forms an intrinsic part of the Near East. At one point, the author almost concedes this much when he writes that “even if the Palestinians are not living in symbiosis with the Israelis, the Palestinian space is subject to the political, economic and military influence of Israel” (p.88). Then is the same not true for Israeli space, which is subject to the influence of its Near Eastern neighbours? Where is the place of the Israeli space, one wonders. Must Israel not be seen as part of the Near East – maybe even more so today than a couple of decades ago? That Israel – its politics, economy, military, culture, and society, and, yes, its space – are deeply intertwined with the Arab Near East is indubitable. By not acknowledging this fact, an opportunity is missed in my view.

However, these objections do little to reduce the overall value of the atlas, whose practical achievements are beyond doubt. The author is to be lauded for having crafted a comprehensive and smart tool, which will help to understand a region whose competing narratives often conceal its multilayered history and ever-changing present.

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Silk, Slaves, and Stupas

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Reviewed title

Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road

Susan Whitfield. 2018.

University of California Press
ISBN 9780520281783

The history of the Silk Road (for the sake of convenience I will use the term Silk Road instead of Roads as this is also the term used in Susan Whitfield's book) is usually written in terms of transfer and exchange; this is transfer of goods, people, fashions, and ideas. While we know now that its history (or should we write 'their' as there were many routes that ran criss-cross the vast area between China and Europe) is difficult to write, we may assume that the foundations were laid from the 6th century BCE onwards when the Persians dominated large stretches of land from the Aegean Sea until the Himalayas. From then we see a rapid growing pattern emerging in which intellectual exchange goes together with the transfer of more tangible goods. While for the vast majority of people in this region (and in others as well) horizons were local, the web of exchange wove into each other to create a world that was international, multilayered and ever-changing. Along this web things could travel fast and it is not difficult to imagine how objects and commodities had the potential to travel from east to west or the other way.

The Silk Road and its material history

It is tempting to see the Silk Road as unidirectional with things always moving from the east to the west. This may be due to the emphasis on goods such as silk that were unknown in the west. However, history has provided us with many examples of items going the other direction. Religions and ideologies such as Christianity and Buddhism are just some of them. And while changes often happened because of events hundreds (or thousands) of miles away, some happened independently from each other, as does the history of early Christianity shows. So, it is not always easy to see the right relations between events, changes, and actions. For objects found in places that sometimes lay at the other end of the road this is true as well. How did it end up there, was this incidental or planned, how and when did it travel to its new place? These are questions that Susan Whitfield asks in *Silk, Slaves and Stupas: Material Culture along the Silk Road*. In this book she showcases ten objects found somewhere along the Silk Road,

nine of them being tangible and materialistic, while one is human and must be seen rather as a concept, since it is referred to as 'the unknown slave'. Blinded as we may be by the spectacular objects, their shape, colour, or delicate form, we tend to forget that the Silk Road was also a slave road. Tribes from the four directions were engaged in fights in order to conquer huge numbers of slaves. These slaves came from the North, sub-Saharan Africa, Turkic tribes of Central Asia, etc. Slave markets thrived across the Silk Road, slaves often being presented as gifts to rulers.

Why this choice for this approach? As the author testifies: “Telling history through objects ... is not a new approach, but over the past two decades it has become more central in teaching and in popularizing world history” (p.2). Objects do tell a tale, a narrative which is different for the three sides concerned: the creator, the user, and the (contemporary) historian, collector, or spectator. Their history often comprises a shift from an object (or tool) to a piece of art. But objects (unless they were too heavy to carry) were not always meant to stay in place. So, movement of objects is essential to the concept of a trade road, in particular the Silk Road. This book is about objects and not about raw materials, such as silk, paper, herbs, etc. By focussing on one particular object Whitfield can tell a much more intriguing tale.

Objects enter in a dialogue with the cultures they encounter. Their function and meaning can be changed by the receiving culture, but objects can also change cultures as they may lie at the basis of new ideas and new concepts. They may be the reason why one culture changes its ideas or approach towards another culture. Objects may be the axis around which new trading routes are opened (or old ones closed) or they may be the instigator for engaging in a war. And so, objects do not only tell their own story, but also the story of moving materials, technologies, and craftsmen, some of which have disappeared.

We must be careful at the same time as most of the objects that make it to our time were either luxurious goods that were deemed fit to be preserved – and as such were given enough care – or they were monumental items such as buildings, stones with inscriptions. So, being the only objects that survived they tell just one part of history, usually a tale of leaders, of wealthy and influential people. Only a rare example will give us a glance of a world that is less familiar.

The quest for each object

It is with this perspective that one should read the story of the ten objects that Whitfield selected. Each object is given full attention in its own chapter, with each chapter answering more or less the same questions: what does the object look like and where was it discovered, how was it transferred to its place of discovery and its present place, how and by whom was it made, why was it made, and what was its meaning during its lifetime. While of course these questions cannot always be answered for each object, Whitfield digs as deep as possible. For most of the objects she can use the findings of other researchers, but she has given herself the task of bringing a coherent story of each object.

Well written, although she lost me sometimes when being too detailed in explaining techniques, this book is at times a page-turner comparable to a good detective story. While each object is a character with its own story, the ten objects are part of a new story, in this case the history of the Silk Road. These objects (to name just a few: earrings, a glass bowl, coins, a stupa) show how the exchange along the road was huge, but that knowledge of this exchange is still poorly documented. A lack of interest and understanding still blocks our view on the Silk Road. This book is a station on the way to the final destination of comprehension!

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