

*Broken Cities: A Historical Sociology of Ruins*. Martin Devecka. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 184 pp. \$97. Hardcover ISBN: 9781421438412.

*Broken Cities* invites readers to look beyond archaeology as a method to understand ruins by providing an interrogation into how these “cultural objects” have been used and articulated (3). Devecka demonstrates that cultures have conceptualized ruins and ruination differently at various points in history by revolving his discussion around four cities: Athens, Rome, Baghdad, and Tenochtitlan. This guides the structure of the book, as a chapter is devoted to each of these four cities. Devecka wants to highlight the human agency and decision-making involved in creating ruins rather than ascribing them exclusively to catastrophe. The examples that Devecka selected clearly accomplish that objective. *Broken Cities* is not the first book on this topic as *In Ruins: A Journey Through History, Art, and Literature* by Christopher Woodward also explores the ways ruins have been perceived, but whereas that book engages in an analysis of literature, art and actual ruins, *Broken Cities* focuses on literature. Furthermore, there is a difference in the ways both texts explore Rome as a ruin; whereas *In Ruins* looks at the ruins of Rome from the literary and artistic representations created during the Renaissance and after, *Broken Cities* offers a more nuanced investigation into the ways Roman writers conceptualized Rome and ruins. This connects to one of the criticisms that Devecka levels at Woodward: the notion that “ruins become an object of sustained reflection only with the Renaissance” (1). Such a notion is successfully challenged by Devecka’s discussion of how Greeks, Romans and Muslims engaged with the idea of ruins.

Devecka uses the first chapter to outline the criteria he believes are necessary to create ruins: “abandonment plus time” (16). The amount of time needed for something to become a ruin can be subjective; however, this brings up an interesting point raised by the book: what constitutes a ruin? In the Western popular mind, it would involve the city’s physical destruction, but Devecka argues that Greek writers conceptualized ruination more along the lines of “displacement of its inhabitants” (16). Devecka contends that Greek city-states, apart from Sparta, could not ruin a city due to an inability and unwillingness to prevent its resettlement, nevertheless, the image of ruins still served an influential “rhetorical function” (21), as he demonstrates through the writings of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Isocrates about Athens at points in its history. Although Devecka notes the difficult nature of creating ruins among the Greek *poleis*, he notes that Alexander the Great was able to turn Persepolis into a ruin, even if questions remain regarding the motive of this “irrational ruination” (35). Citing Plutarch’s assertion that Thaïs incited Alexander and other Macedonians to act in response to Xerxes’s destruction of Athens allows Devecka to elucidate on another function for ruins: as motivation to exact revenge. Regardless of whether Plutarch’s account is accurate or Thaïs was simply used “to excuse Alexander” for Persepolis’s destruction, Devecka contends that Persepolis marked a transitional point as being “the first ruin of a new age” (35-36).

If Devecka argues that it was nearly “impossible” to create ruins within the classical Greek context (10), he shows that Rome was aware of what ruins entailed since they had created many during its expansion. Devecka points to the importance of migration in one chapter: the growth of

Rome, which was conceptualized as the heart of the empire, came at the expense of other cities, including Alba Longa, a city discussed in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. Troy was also an important topic in Roman literary works to discuss questions of migration, Rome's origins, and loyalty. Devecka shows Roman writers adopted certain rhetorical functions in their articulation of ruins and in imagining Rome when confronted with the possibility that the Eternal City could suffer such a fate. He identifies Polybius as the first known writer to consider this and Livy's *Ab urbe condita* outlines a debate of whether it would be best to resettle in another city rather than rebuild a Rome ruined by a Gallic attack. Devecka believes the works of Rutilius and similar others helped people transfer "their affective attachments away from Rome as a central place" in the period following its sacking in 410 (58). However, Devecka shows that even in the sixth century, the image of a restored Rome still had currency as Cassiodorus praised Theoderic for restoring the city "to legitimate his rule" when in reality it had been cannibalized and scavenged (56).

Devecka uses the third chapter to chart the development of Islamic urbanism to demonstrate the attitudes Muslim writers had towards cities, their anxieties regarding past ruins, and to draw attention to the importance of monumental architecture to showcase the superiority of Islam over other religions. Devecka stresses the importance of the Qur'an as it informed Muslims that ruins helped them better understand God's will since they were interpreted as "God's wrath" from which Muslims could discern moral lessons (82). Perhaps more importantly, Devecka identifies the rich "rivalry" that existed in Muslim discourse between the present and ruins of old (62). Devecka elucidates this point through an analysis of al-Tabari's writings regarding the advice Khalid ibn Barmak gave to the Caliph al-Mansur in the construction of Madinat al-Salam, where Khalid cautioned him against scavenging from the Iwan of Khusraw since he would appear weaker than its builders should he fail to "wreck it" to "its foundations" (75). The rise of Muslim cities that went along with territorial expansion led to the "parasitizing" of older cities of building materials and other resources (77). This dynamic is outlined well by discussing the Muslim city of Kufa, which benefited from scavenging from Hira and experienced ruination at the hands of Madinat al-Salam. Although Devecka charts the progression of Islamic urbanism, he stops short of exploring how the ruination of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols was articulated by Muslim writers, perhaps too easily writing the city off as being "ruined" by that date (8).

The last ruin Devecka explores is Tenochtitlan, as he contends that Cortez's destruction of it "became a challenge to Europe's self-understanding as a 'civilization' built on ruins and committed to rescuing ruins from 'barbarism'" (90). Devecka notes a dichotomous mode of thinking that existed among some Renaissance writers as they ascribed ruin-making to "barbarians," and preservation to "civilized" powers (99). Devecka also points to the fact that there was a tendency to repurpose mosques for cathedrals during the Reconquista, which allowed for the mosque to be preserved, even if in an altered state. One needs to look at the nuances of this argument a little further. Although there was a tendency to turn mosques into cathedrals in Spain during the Reconquista, Justin E. A. Kroesen provides a list of cities where these structures were later destroyed in his article "From Mosques to Cathedrals: Converting Sacred Space During the Spanish Reconquest." Although there was symbolism behind using these mosques as Christian

sites, Kroesen speculates economic factors may also explain why these mosques survived as cathedrals before being demolished. This leads to the question regarding the degree to which a conservationist spirit was applied to these mosques or if there were other reasons for their delayed demolition.

Devecka contends Cortez's destruction of Tenochtitlan was a "blunder" (8) as he failed to understand the "signs" and "script" the Aztecs would have used to signify defeat (104-105). This "script" entailed "a pitched battle in the field and ended with the destruction of a conquered city's temple" (104-105), but it is speculative if this would have prompted the Aztecs to surrender. Devecka uses the writings of Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, Cornelius de Pauw, and the abbé Raynal to show they downplayed the sophistication of Aztec civilization, and ultimately argues literary works tried "to cover it [this blunder] up" (9). However, one needs to consider whether de Pauw and Raynal, two eighteenth-century writers born in the Netherlands and France, respectively, were more influenced by an eighteenth-century social milieu that perceived Indigenous populations lacking such sophistication and notions of degeneracy rather than trying to cover up the Spanish destruction of Tenochtitlan. This bias against Indigenous populations is briefly explored within the chapter and acknowledged regarding de Pauw in endnote 47 of the final chapter, but this discussion could have been drawn out more within the text.

The epilogue brings forth the current relevancy of ruins as Devecka reiterates that "Mexico is everywhere" and warns that "we ignore this at our peril" (114, 115, 118). Devecka is correct that we need to analyze the historical processes that have led to ruination, particularly since they may be occurring without our notice. Although the book is geared towards an academic audience, it successfully engages in a dialogue to complicate the popular understanding of ruins. In his third chapter, Devecka acknowledges a book could be written on Muslim engagement with ancient structures in Northern Africa, but there is such rich material on this topic that the other three chapters could also be further developed by examining more writers to lengthen the book. There is also the possibility that the subject matter of the last chapter could be developed into a book-length examination. Nevertheless, Devecka certainly makes a compelling case about the ways in which humans have contributed to the creation of ruins and the different ways in which they have been viewed and used. It is invited that researchers adopt similar tactics used by Devecka to explore how ruins or the ruination of cities not explored in this text have been articulated and used.

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