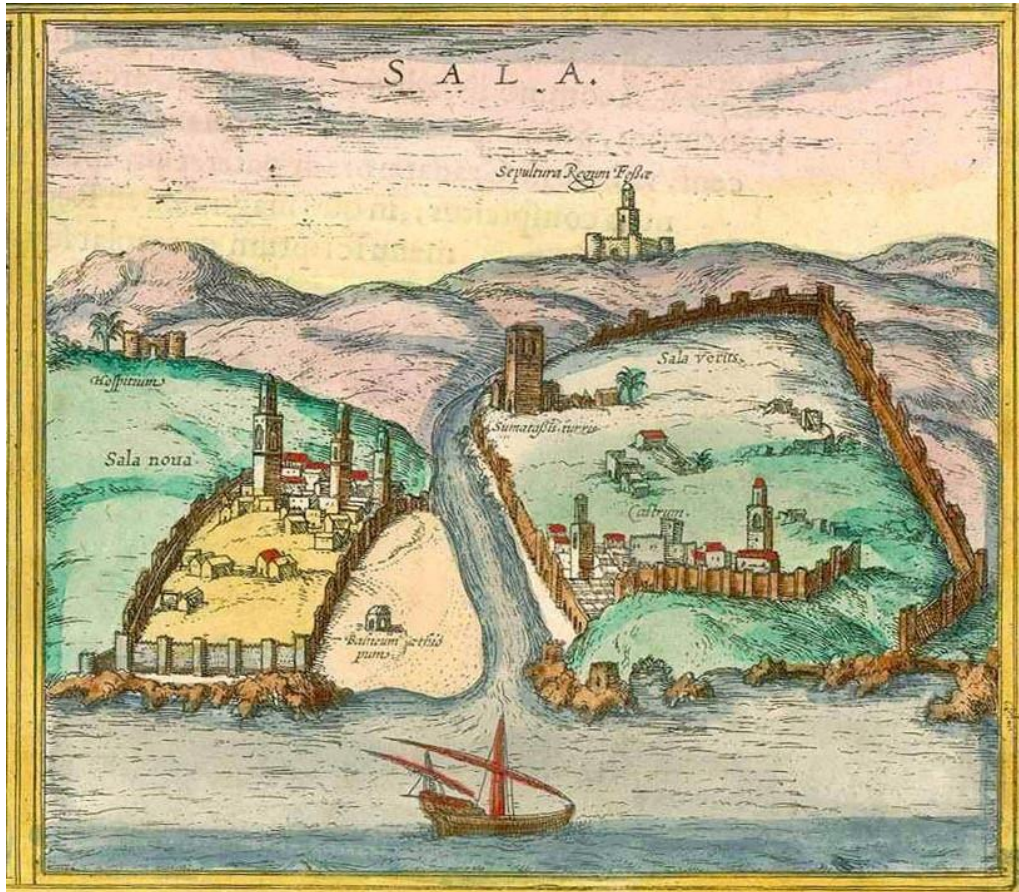


## *The 'Pearl of Morocco'*



For a short time in 1912 Fes was the capital of French Morocco, until it occurred to Maréchal Lyautey that the oyster-grey city, far inland below the heights of the Middle Atlas, was not a very secure location for an imperial capital. Apart from anything else, naval access was distinctly limited. The march to the nearest port was long and dangerous. In 1912, after two sieges of Fes in quick succession, his attention switched quickly to Rabat on the coast, 130 miles and a week's ride away through the Marmora forest. Rabat was eventually declared the new capital of Morocco, after a long bout of slightly mysterious arm-wrestling with Paris. It was – for the purposes of colonial government – a much more sensible choice.

Rabat was an 'Imperial City,' which is to say that it was a habitual stopping place for the sultans on their royal progresses around their possessions, and that it boasted a royal palace. Indeed it boasted two, the great enclosure of the Mechouar with which we are familiar today, and the Qubaybat, the 'Little Domes,' as the summer palace down by the sea was known, lost as it now is beneath the oddly

Gormenghastian remains of French military and medical buildings. Like Salé across the river, it was a way-station on the only secure north-south route between Morocco's two chief capitals, Fes and Marrakech, and thus strategically important in its own right. Lyautey described it as lying "at the intersection of the three major axes of Morocco, one towards Taza, one towards Marrakech, and the third one along the coast ..." and in the light of this strategic centrality it is surprising how small a part Rabat had actually played in Moroccan history in the preceding millennium.

But it had another feature too, which made it extraordinarily suitable for development as a colonial capital, a feature that was the product of Rabat's strange, episodic, history. The little city on the southern tip of the Bouregreg estuary occupied only a tiny portion of the walled area that Sultan Yacoub al-Mansour had enclosed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century for his new capital: al-Mansour's city walls still stood tall, but they enclosed smallholdings and rough pasture and a good deal, too, of waste land between the marshy edge of the river and the Mechouar. Like Rome in the early Renaissance, the city had shrunk to a tiny fragment of what it had been – or, in the case of Rabat, had been imagined as becoming – and much of it lay empty, protected by high walls, open and inviting to the French architect of empire.

To understand why this was so requires a quick gallop through the history of Rabat. It is a rich history, but not one of steady and incremental growth like that of so many modern capitals. It has had very different shapes, names and characters at different times. Today it is on the verge of another, perhaps cataclysmic, transformation from a quiet, green and gentle city into a noisy metropolis little different from the other agglomerations of 'contemporary' architecture and shopping opportunity that are the capital cities of the modern Middle East.

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But let's start with geography. Rabat occupies a strategic spot on the Atlantic coast, well enough placed as late as the turn of the nineteenth century to serve Fes as its principal port, and at the same time on the 'safe' corridor between Fes and Marrakech. At the mouth of the Oued Bouregreg the river broadens out between two headlands, offering shelter from the ocean, and an anchorage. The estuary had one very particular feature, a sandbar across the opening which caused a violent and often dangerous turbulence. This bar helped to define the usefulness and history of Rabat: in early modern times it prevented the passage of large-draught ships, so that the shallow pirate vessels could run for harbour across the bar, at least at high tide, leaving European warships helpless beyond it in the Sally Roads. The bar made of the estuary between the two cities a secure base for corsairs preying on the traffic of the Atlantic coast and further afield, helping to define the

city's character. It remained a constant feature of Rabat until 1755, when the 'Lisbon' earthquake, with its epicentre 200 kilometres off Cape St Vincent and an estimated force of 8.5-9.0 on the Richter Scale, shook the two towns of the Bouregreg estuary (as well as damaging most of the other major towns of Morocco). The quake also raised the sand-bar significantly, making the estuary even more difficult of access for larger ships, and more dangerous for smaller ones. This probably didn't matter greatly at once, though in bad weather ships would sometimes have to anchor for a week and more in the roads waiting for the bar to become passable for the lighters which went out to unload them. As Mercier observed in 1905 of smaller ferry-boats, "the current, of which the direction varies according to the tide, is often very strong and pushes many boats off their course. It even happens, if the boatman doesn't know his trade, that a boat is driven onto the bar and capsized by large waves. In this sort of case, many passengers don't make it back to shore."

In the nineteenth century, as merchant ships grew larger, and as Casablanca began to offer a livelier trading centre only a little to the south, the port of Rabat went into long-term decline. With the opening of the magnificent new port at Casablanca in 1921, Rabat's fate was sealed. Today its main shipping, apart from the remaining ferry-boats that try in vain to compete with the new bridge between Rabat and Salé, is a large, plywood dhow built on the quay below the Qasbah des Oudayas, and used as a restaurant.

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In the forecourt of one of the motor-car dealerships on Avenue Hassan II there is a large chunk of stone, which I have failed on several occasions to find, but which a reliable friend assures me - he is a *wali*, so it must be true - exists. It is the last fragment of the *limes*, the southern boundary, indeed the bottom left-hand corner, of the Roman Empire. It marks Rabat's position at the very end of the civilised world, Rome's *ne plus ultra*. Pliny reported in the early first century AD that the banks of the river Sala, as the Bouregreg was then called, had a serious elephant problem. Rabat was right on the very edge of the wild.

Even its name is a bit of a muddle. The older and once much richer town on the north bank of the estuary is called Sla, which the French frenchified into Salé and the English englished into Sallee or Sally, illustrating their shared inability to wrestle successfully with the vowel-free Rabat colloquial. Though the two cities have very different histories and characters, their fates were bound up with one another. 'Sla' seems to relate to the name of the old Roman settlement, Sala Colonia, which is also the etymological starting-point for Chella, the great walled enclosure outside the Bab Za'er, sitting on the site of the Roman (and perhaps an earlier Punic) port of which it incorporates the excavated forum. The observant

reader will already have noted that modern Salé is on the north, and ancient Sala on the south bank of the river. The migration of names is confusing and at times seems almost wilful. The city of Rabat was often (for example by Richard Simson on his 1637 map) referred to as New Sally or *Sala Nova*, and sometimes even (in another engraved view by Braun and Hogenbergt, of 1572) as *Sala Vetera*, or Old Sally. It is hard to resist the impression that these two cities, which on the whole detested each other (as an old proverb has it, “Slawis can never have affection for Rbatis, even if the river were to become milk and the sand raisins”), lived grumpily together like an ill-matched old married couple, sulking for long periods, exchanging blows on occasion, but muddling along in an inextricable, resentful embrace.

But whatever it was called on maps, Rabat had a perfectly good name of its own, *Ribat al-Fath*, of which ‘Rabat’ is just another un-euphonious francophone approximation. It means something like the Convent of the Victories, and reflects the first foundation on the south bank of the estuary in the tenth century, a sort of dervish garrison facing into the territory of the truculent pagan Berber tribes to the south. By the time of the Almohad conquest and the reign of al-Mansour (1184-99) it had shuffled round through 180 degrees, focusing its belligerent attentions northward to face Spain and serve the imperial ambitions of its Almohad sultan.

Al-Mansour, ‘the Victorious,’ had an ambitious vision for making Ribat al-Fath his imperial capital, and he built to scale. Most spectacular was the great stone-and-*pisé* enceinte, the ‘Almohad Wall,’ on the two land sides of the city, enclosing a vast area of some 400 hectares. The two other sides were protected by the sea and a cliff along the river. Into this space were built a number of monuments, most notably the Hasan mosque whose enormous tower still dominates the Rabat skyline. It is built to echo two other great mosque-towers in al-Mansur’s transcontinental empire – the Giralda at Seville and the Kutubiya in Marrakech – but had it been finished would have been larger than either, just as the mosque itself would have been larger than any on earth apart from Samarra’s Al-Mutawakkil mosque. Its unfinished colonnades stood until 1755 when they were felled by the ‘Lisbon’ earthquake. Other remnants of that great building spree are two magnificent gates – one, the grand entrance to the Qasbah above the Souk al-Ghazel; the other, the Bab al-Rouah on the Marrakech road. The mosques of Salé and the Qasbah des Oudayas date, too, from this moment of architectural energy.

There must have been other less important buildings, but most of the land within the walls was never built on at all and al-Mansur’s Rabat remained a vast, empty enclosure overgrown with wild vines and brushwood where it was not cultivated. When the sultan died in 1199, the restless attention of his successors moved on, and Rabat subsided into sleep. Such settlement as there was concentrated on the

tip of the point, where the medina now stands, along the Alou ridge and the slopes down each side of it; but nothing of great moment actually happened for 400 years. Every view that we have of the city shows an empty circuit of walls with a village on the tip and a half-built tower, all set in a green field, with Chella in the background.

Chella (the French transliteration leads English-speakers to mispronounce it as though its 'ch' were the 'ch' of chocolate rather than the 'sh' of sheep) is testimony to another, even more glancing, if slightly more protracted, moment of interest in Rabat from the powerful. The Almohads were defeated in Spain and in North Africa by the mid-thirteenth century, and their Merinid successors took understandable umbrage at Rabat's having cast its lot with the Christian Spanish invaders: the Merinid sultans favoured Salé over the rapidly disappearing ghost-city on the south bank. They did however take the site of old Sala Colonia in hand, walling it and making of it a royal necropolis where sultans from Abu Yusuf Yaqub to Abul Hassan are buried. In time, it too fell into decay, although it remains a place of great beauty and not inconsiderable superstition, where quiet fertility rites take place, marabouts are revered, sacred eels propitiated and the Merinid sultans are remembered through the misty filter of wonderfully baroque folk-tales. Through it all, Rabat continued to sleep.

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During this long sleep, Salé, the 'City of Saints,' was the dominant partner, a bustling, conservative place of commerce and handicraft, and scholarship on an industrial scale, where farmers came to buy shoes and sell sheep, and students came to sit at the feet of the famous teachers in its *madrasas* and mosques. Both cities of course were deeply marinated in the cultural and political tides that washed to and fro between Spain and Morocco, and the consequences of Muslim decline in Iberia. An Andalusian exile like Lisan al-Din al-Khatib, poet and vizier, spent his banishment from Granada at Salé in 1359-62, studying sufism and absorbing the aesthetic of Salé's Merinid madrasa, recently built by Abul Hassan. Ibn Khaldun, born in Tunis to a family from Seville, spent his career in Granada, Fes, Tlemcen and Tunis, dying in Cairo in 1406. Other Muslims migrated southward individually, and in groups, over the centuries as al-Andalus was squeezed and dismembered by Christian armies; but it was only with Philip III's expulsion after 1609 of the *moriscos* – those Muslims who had converted to Christianity and remained in Spain, but whose sincerity it was prudent, or useful, to doubt – that a new impetus was given to Rabat by mass migration from Spain to Africa. The emigrés went first to port cities along the North African coast, and the number of them who eventually reached Rabat was small – fewer than 6,000 at most. But all of them had burning grievances against Christians in general and

Spaniards in particular, for the pillaging and expulsion they had suffered. Some of them carried the keys to Spanish houses and gardens that are still lovingly preserved today as symbols of a violent, heart-scorching loss. Most of them wanted revenge and recompense, and the already prosperous business of piracy was a very attractive career option and investment opportunity.

Once in Africa, these *moriscos* were referred to as Muslims, and while their religious practice was often at first considered wild and even heterodox, they seem on the whole to have slipped off their Christianity like a coat on a hot day. The Slawis regarded the Spanish incomers as no better than wine-bibbing heathens; but a captive friar in Salé wrote that “though manie of the Mores of this place were brought up in Spaine, and are therefore of a well-tempered naturall disposition, yet the great infection which this place receives from the Alarabes or wild Arabians ... hath brought a general corruption into their manners ...” They were curiously intercultural, in fact, speaking the language, and wearing the clothes, of their Spanish home; suspected of Christianity by Moroccans as they had been of Islam by Spaniards. Their women went about the streets with heads uncovered and they themselves planted vines for wine-making - both behaviours that scandalised the orthodox. Even at this late stage though, migrants from Muslim Spain were travelling within a cultural zone that had been continuous and coherent for almost a thousand years – and many had families and business associates south of the straits. Rabat became a crucible of cultural fusion.

The Spanish Muslims who came to Rabat were from two very distinct sources. First were the *Hornacheros*, the Castilian-speaking Muslims of the small hill-town of Hornachos in Estramadura. They were a cohesive band of armed hillsmen with a fearsome reputation for lawlessness, independence, fighting spirit and solidarity. By the time they left their home town in January 1610 they had made themselves such a violent nuisance to the Castilian authorities that they were allowed to march out of Hornachos to embark at Seville with their arquebuses on their shoulders and their coin and their chattels carried between them – like a garrison that had surrendered with full military honours. Their first port of call was Tetouan, where some settled and where Spanish-derived family-names like Bonito, Blanco and Carpintero testify to their passage. Many moved on to Salé, where they weren't much welcomed, and soon crossed the estuary to Ribat al-Fath. Here they took over what is now the Qasbah des Oudayas, the walled fortress within the town that occupies the high point of the promontory's tip, and which had been the site of the very first *ribat*. They were already well established when the second wave of refugees arrived, attracted perhaps by the magnetic idea of the Morisco city that Rabat was rapidly becoming. This second wave was for the most part a ragbag of penniless Andalusians, expelled without arquebuses, capital or house-keys, piecemeal from the ports of the south coast. They were not enormously welcome

at first, but settled below the *Hornacheros*' walls, in a little warren of houses across the Souk al-Ghazel from the Qasbah. In a fairly obvious division of labour the *Hornacheros* provided the business capital, the pirate ships and perhaps the ship-masters too; and the Andalusians, the fighting crew, for the pirate fleet.

The next half century, until the Alawite sultan captured both towns in the 1660s, was a jumbled confusion of three-cornered fighting between the *Hornacheros* (sometimes in control of the Qasbah, sometimes not) and the Andalusians (the same, but alternately), one side or the other frequently allied with the town of Salé, generally ruled by a sanguinary saint, and when possible with the naval forces of any visiting European power. The three towns, Rabat, Salé and the Qasbah made up a pirate republic sometimes over-dignified as the 'Republic of the Bouregreg,' which must in reality have been rather like Captain Jack Sparrow's Tortuga. "The alliances shifted in unpredictable fashion, the game of *tertius gaudens* was played with consummate skill, and the external powers often entered at the invitation of one of the players, only to seek their own goals in turn," as Janet Abu-Lughod nicely puts it. It was a time of chaos and bloodshed as all parties battled over control of *la course* – the lucrative corsair business of capturing Christian shipping and turning its ships, cargoes, crews and passengers into cash. It may have been a defining moment of economic growth and political semi-independence for Rabat, but in the end all the squabbling parties lost out to the renascent Alawite sultanate which nationalised the business of piracy.

This was the period when Rabat took its premodern form. The *medina* became a walled city in its own right, with a new stone-and-*pisé* wall – the 'Andalusian Wall' - built across the tip of the point from the Bab al-Had in the old Almohad enceinte, to the cliffs above the river at Burj Sidi Makhoulf – the line of Lyautey's Haussmanesque Boulevards Gallieni and Joffre (now Hassan II). The rest of the great enclosure was left outside the new inner wall, and despite its tall defences was not altogether safe for townsmen to walk or ride through unarmed.

Rabat also began to develop its own very particular culture. The little city on the Bouregreg was, and is, the only city in Morocco to be founded by Moriscos, and so to distil into itself an Andalusian essence (of a very particular late Ibero-Andalusian texture) that is still perceptible – largely because it has become characteristic of a broader Moroccan high culture. In the late twentieth century there were still some 50 or so Rbati families of Andalusian lineage, and along with the *bnifin*, the almost equally clannish old Moroccan Arab aristocracy who to a great extent followed the Andalusian ways, they occupied the heights of Rbati society. Fair-skinned, inward-looking, inward-marrying and sophisticated, they developed an attractive Spanish-impregnated culture of their own, while shaping many of the tastes and attitudes of Moroccan society, and eventually taking leading places in it. As a nineteenth



century chronicler put it, “They are unequalled through their pure, noble Andalusian descent from the ancient ancestral ... civilisation, which is evident from its remaining in Rabat and the people from Rabat ... how they are distinct, Splendour of the Sun, in their knowledge and their letters and their arts and their crafts.”

Rabat itself, as the *medina* grew and became more organized in the seventeenth century, took on a most un-Moroccan plan of straight-ish streets and well-segmented quarters. The houses acquired classical architraves around their doors, today buried deep in many layers of paint, and the material culture took a characteristically Andalusian form, with embroidery that echoed the floral patterns of Spanish women’s *mantones*, and painted woodwork tending to flowers, vines and curlicues rather than the sharp geometries of Fes and Marrakech. Music too remained highly traditional, with the Andalusian arts of ‘*oud* and *rebab* cultivated and practised amongst Andalusian Rbatis, along with the sung poetry of the Andalusian *muwashshat*. Their cuisine had, and has, its distinct features, most obviously the *bastilla* (once Spanish *pastilla*), the overpoweringly rich sugared pie of pigeon and almond paste that is still so enthusiastically eaten across Morocco. Above all, though, it is visible in the people. Many of the leading families of Rabat have names that if scraped only a little reveal their Spanish origins, names like Berrado and Bargash, Belafrej, Kilito, al-Ronda, Krisbu, Karaksho, Guedira, Guessous, Al-Madur, Al-Qistali, Sabata and Marino: one list has almost 100 Rbati family names, extant and extinct, that are Spanish in origin.

This was the Rabat that drifted on through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Integration into the Alawite realm began to chip away at the Andalusian uniqueness of the city, with Arabic replacing Spanish as the lingua franca, and European dress fading away in favour of ‘Arab’ dress, albeit of a startling whiteness that was often commented on as Andalusian. Rabat scarcely grew, confined within the Andalusian wall of the *medina*, and it scarcely changed – though the earthquake of 1755 began the long, slow commercial decline of the port, hastened by Moulay Ibn Abdallah’s decree of 1781 ordering all commerce and all foreign representatives to move to his new port of Essaouira, far to the south. 1829 saw the formal end of the business of piracy. By the mid-nineteenth century the port of Casablanca was beginning to attract migrants from Rabat and Fes, while European manufactured imports were undermining the traditional artisan economic base of Rabat and its sister city across the estuary. Rabat was isolated, a quiet, stable island of a very particular, syncretic culture in a sea of change, and the history of Morocco seemed to be passing it by.

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All this changed in 1912, of course, when the victorious French decided to fix the capital of the Protectorate in one place, and chose Rabat. The little city was cracked open to the world and began the dynamic course of development and internationalisation that characterized its twentieth century. Fortunately, the French Vice-Consul, Louis Mercier, wrote a detailed topographical account of the city in 1905 and through his eyes we can see the city, innocent on the verge of huge changes, a sleepy and beautiful backwater on the Atlantic coast of Africa.

One immediately striking feature of Mercier's Rabat is the insecurity prevalent in the countryside around the city – country much of which was within the walls, and today is well inside the city centre. The problem was armed and predatory tribesmen, Za'er and Zemmour, who preyed on anyone vulnerable, native or European: of Bab Za'er, Mercier writes that "according to a local tradition reported to us, the name of this gate comes from the fact that the Za'er killed a great many townspeople here in continual ambushes. Nowadays it is the gate through which you must never pass unarmed, advice which is taken seriously;" and of the Hasan Tower, that "very few citizens dare to venture as far as the Hasan Tower, because of its position close to the Oued, on the edge of which there is no rampart at all, [which] means that one can all too easily meet there Za'er or Zemmour tribesmen with hostile intentions." Only on the walk down the coast from the Bab Alou towards al-Qubaybat, the sultan's summer palace, could walkers "be fairly sure of not being troubled by the audacious enterprises of the Za'er: they call this stretch of coast *Madreb El-Aman*, which means 'the Place of Safety.'" Much of the rest of the little city's surroundings were not *Madreb El-Aman* at all.

Rabat's inhabitants were well protected behind the Andalusian Wall. Mercier reports that the Sultan had forbidden foreigners to travel by boat up the Bouregreg past the wall's end at Burj Sidi Makhoul, though wildfowling did brave the centre channel of the marshy river, and occasional expeditions with armed guards made pleasure-outings to the orange groves of Souissi Pasha (where the first navel orange, *bi-sur*, is said to have been grown) and to the Hasan Tower, where a tennis court was maintained in the courtyard for picnickers, though by Mercier's time it was not deemed safe to play there. This insecurity helps explain Mercier's detailed description of Rabat's walls and gates, which were far from simply decorative, all locked and guarded at night with only the little Buwayba allowing the possibility of late entrance under certain circumstances. The walls were poorly but adequately maintained, if not as well built as those of the Qasbah. In addition to the outer Almohad circuit already noted, they included another wall further out to the south – the Alaouite Wall - running up from the coast at the Qubaybat and enclosing in a long strip the summer palace and the Mechouar and part of the Aguédal, which would become the suburban quarter of Agdal. These walls were consumed in the

southward expansion of the city during the Protectorate, and now the sites of the gates are marked by big road-intersections two of which – Sahat Bab-Tamesna and Sahat Bab-Marrakech – preserve the names, while the Bab al-Qubaybat (or Bab Dar al-Baida) has disappeared under the old Casablanca road where it meets Rue Qubaybat.

Otherwise the Vice-Consul describes a town that was – superficially at least – not much changed in centuries. He enumerates the quarters and their gates, the places where trades clustered, and the places of pleasure like the Alou, the breezy ridge at the top of the medina, and the

*very large space which borders the northern edge of the town, sloping steeply down to the sea. It is enclosed on two sides, the north and the west, by the walls of the inner circuit; on the south by the town itself; and on the eastern side by the Qaçba of the Ouidiya. Here one can enjoy a splendid view of the city of Rabat and the area immediately to its west, a view that extends across the Atlantic, the sandbar and part of Salé. This area is the destination of idlers, and all who like to dream, of whichever race. All this precious space remains unbuilt upon, because it is covered in tombs, forming several cemeteries made holy by the numerous qoubba of local marabouts. You see there too, on the ridge, a small battery of old cannon, next to the Qaçba. The three or four bronze pieces, mounted on wooden carriages, are aimed towards the city and are used to fire salvos at times of public rejoicing.*

He accounts for the water-supply, brought in by aqueducts from Ayn-Atiq and Ain R'eboula, and the fountains that they feed. And he tells interestingly of some of the city's more particular localities, including the Mellah, the Jewish quarter,

*formed by a large central street off which lead many cul-de-sacs. At the end of this main street, on the west side, there is a large open space, up against the southern and eastern faces of the inner walls. This is where the great rubbish heaps of the quarter, which is remarkable for its cleanliness, are located. Here too blow the foul stench of various local industries, the drying of bones after butchering, of animal waste and of skins. A large breach opened in the walls on the eastern side very close to the south-east angle gives onto the river and Salé, offering a magnificent view. This breach has never been sealed up again, undoubtedly through the negligence of the Makhzen, and perhaps also because the cliff here constitutes an adequate natural defence, overlooking the waters of the river with an almost vertical drop of about 15 metres. At the entrance to the Mellah are to be found the butcheries for kosher meat and the spice and vegetable merchants. All along the main street there are the shops of tailors, shoe-makers, silk-workers, embroiderers on leather, tinsmiths and so on.*

The city's Jews were of Andalusian and of Berber origins, and although active in many trades, worked the gold that Muslim men were forbidden to wear, as well as

pickling in salt for public display the heads of the Sultan's decapitated enemies. They were not always well treated, Mercier noting that Jews and Christians were particularly abused on the street

*called Ridjal Eç-Çoff or 'the Saints of the Throng,' because it encloses a large number of sanctuaries and venerated tombs ... The whole street's character as horm means that Jews can't risk walking there except in bare feet: they are still often roughed up when passing under the pretty arbour which leads from the tomb of Moulay El-Mekky Ould Moulay El-Tehamy and crosses the road about halfway along. As for Christians it is not uncommon for them to be insulted and jostled in this place, and invited to turn round and go back the way they came.*

Modernity intruded, particularly along the Alou, the ridge on the north side, where a tarmac road and, for a time, a small railway led from the port below Bab el-Bahr, along the Alou, out through a hole blasted in the wall (and later re-sealed) and on to the quarries close to the Rothemburg Battery. The road had been built a decade or so before Mercier wrote, to transport the two 24-ton, 26cm Krupp guns destined for the battery, for which a huge crane had been installed, and a quay built, at the port. The whole thing was a shemozzle typical of the times, a gigantically expensive military folly foisted upon Moulay Hassan by the Germans, with no obvious defensive use, though it doubtless made a good show next to the Sultan's residence at al-Qubaybat. It took thirteen years to build (1888-1901) and never fired a shot in anger, humiliatingly failing even to salute the Sultan successfully at its inauguration. Indeed the biggest bang it ever made was in 1911, when its magazine was accidentally ignited and an enormous explosion rocked southern Rabat, killing several members of the garrison and wrecking the heavily rusticated Balmoral-like building of the fort.

Rabat, though, was changing more than appeared on the surface. The growing import of European manufactured commodities and luxuries was undermining the traditional artisanal crafts of Morocco's cities and the delicate social structure that rested on traditional employment, education, administration and religious practice. Meanwhile other port cities, primarily Casablanca, were fast taking away the business of Rabat's small port. The commercial city that Lyautey declared Morocco's capital in 1913 was already living on borrowed time: its new status as capital city would be its salvation.

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The development of colonial Rabat has been well chronicled and explored, perhaps above all by Janet Abu-Lughod, to whom any writer on the city must acknowledge a great debt. She analyzed the development of French Rabat with unblinking clarity, seeing in Lyautey's apparently benign planning policies for

Morocco's cities, "a system of cultural and religious apartheid, segregating Europeans in new cities laid out on vast open spaces and 'following a plan aimed at realising the most modern conditions – large boulevards, conduits for water and electricity, squares and gardens, buses and tramways,' while confining Moroccans to the oldest cities which, he decreed, should be touched as little as possible."

Lyautey's town planners began in Rabat with an almost empty canvas on which to work, in the 'vast open space' enclosed by the Almohad walls. The decision was taken early, and was fundamental to Lyautey's vision of the Moroccan protectorate, that the *medina* would remain the Muslim town and that the French *Nouvelle Ville* would be built on the empty ground, and would be French. Separating them was a crucial part of the plan, but it became clear quickly that because of aggressive land speculation by Europeans in the area immediately outside the Andalusian walls, there could be no dramatic spatial separation as at Fes and Marrakech where the European towns were built well away from the *medina*. Nonetheless the broad boulevard and a 250 metre zone in which building was forbidden, between the Andalusian Wall and the *Nouvelle Ville* served much the same purpose – a *cordon sanitaire* in both hygienic and security senses.

An arch-conservative, romantic royalist and ruthless imperialist with a deep fascination for oriental culture, Lyautey saw and seized the chance to mould Morocco into something very different from other colonies – it was technically a Protectorate, with the Sultan maintained as a figurehead, but behind every decision stood the French colonial administration, and behind that administration, until 1923, Lyautey. With his Director of Planning, Henri Prost, he set about building what has been called "a masterpiece of successful town-planning and architecture." It is indeed a very beautiful city, and although the *medina* and the *Nouvelle Ville* remain stylistically and architecturally distinct, the racial and cultural lines of division between old and new blurred and vanished with the end of the Protectorate. Under Lyautey the French administration built the regime which Abu-Lughod calls "urban apartheid," by which each legal device designed for the development of the city, "became a tool not only for city planning but for the systematic transfer of Moroccan resources to the French colonists and their new and elegant urban quarters." This was done through a legal framework of land-registration that was designed, and abused ("the opportunities for fraud were spectacular"), to ensure that prime land was concentrated cheaply in French hands. It was underpinned by an entirely unscrupulous system of land appropriation from the royal domain and the *habous* (or *awqaf*) which allowed the authorities to fund infrastructural development with the sale-proceeds of lands for which they had not paid. And a system of building regulation was designed to make effectively impossible the conversion or refurbishment of buildings in the *medina* that

Europeans would be prepared to live in, and the construction in the *Nouvelle Ville* of houses that would be acceptable to Moroccan Muslims.

This is of course vastly to oversimplify, but in early twentieth century Rabat we face the contradictory spectacle of a truly lovely city – and Rabat is still the loveliest of all Arab capitals – built on the systematic spoliation of its native inhabitants. Prost and his colleagues set aside the *medina*, but nothing else south of the river, for Muslim Moroccans. Europeans, who made up at no point more than a third of Rabat's population, had a land area ten times the size of the *medina* reserved for them. The *medina* itself was hemmed in on all sides either by water or by European areas, so that it could not expand: Océan, immediately beyond the south-western wall of the *medina* on the coast, was built for lower-middle and working class southern Europeans; Agdal was reserved for the university; the southern area of Qubaybat, where the Sultan's summer palace had stood, became the Quartier Militaire taking in Fort Hervé, as the Rothemburg Battery was re-christened by the French, and Camp Garnier; and adjacent, the Institut Pasteur and the Hôpital Marie Feuillet. Within the Almohad Walls was the Quartier des Services Administratifs du Protectorat centred on the French Residency, and conveniently close to the Touarga and the Mechouar which formed the royal precinct. A little further down the hill lay the commercial zone, its spine the Avenue Dar a-Makhzen, now Mohammed V, its centre the crossroads where the PTT, the Mairie and the Banque du Maroc would stand.

The result was that the *medina* became a pressure-cooker, its population but not its land-area ballooning. Immigration fed dramatic growth (the Moroccan Muslim population of Rabat-Salé quadrupled between 1926 and 1947 alone, and a full half of the Muslim population lived in the *medina* by the end of that period), but zoning-laws made it impossible to expand. So population densities rose dramatically as migrants from the countryside arrived, fleeing the disastrous effects of land enclosure and privatisation, looking for day-work on the vast building-site that Rabat became in the 1920s and early 30s. They crammed into the *medina* until it was saturated. Gardens were built upon, houses sub-divided, and gradually the *medina* became poorer through a blend of inward migration by landless labourers and the relocation of the rich. Middle and upper class Rbatis moved when they could – and there was never a law actually forbidding them - to the new suburbs that grew up after the war and to which their access became more readily accepted: Agdal, Souissi and Aviation in particular. When the *medina* could hold no more people, poor migrants began to settle in *bidonvilles*, shanty-towns, along the coast beyond Océan and in the hills above the river outside the Za'er Gate. It was a problem that the French only began to address in the last decade of the protectorate, and one which persists to the present.

One result of this was that the richer inhabitants of the medina, which meant predominantly the Andalusians, settled in more commodious villas in the new suburbs (and there is a suggestion that Hassan II positively encouraged this exodus, in the interests of homogenizing the city). Rabat expanded southwards into Agdal, and then on into the estates of Souissi Pasha which became the Quartier Souissi, recalling the family which had provided the city of Rabat with several generations of *qa'ids*. Aviation grew up around the aerodrome, and slowly but surely the frontier of gentility pushed further out into the countryside, consuming the lands of the Oudaya *jaysb* and other tribes to build first Hay Riyad and then the newer Hay Riyad Extension. Meanwhile some of the *bidonvilles* became surreptitiously more formal and ultimately even legal, like Darb Akkari; and others, particularly the eyesores of Douar Doum and Yacoub al-Mansour (the Almohad Sultan again, drafted in to make of one of the poorest zones of Rabat a celebration of past grandeur) were veiled from the sight of motorists with high walls, and gradually cleared and replaced, or moved, a process still not complete today. But rather than follow the intricacies of town-planning through the twentieth century, I shall change tempo a little, and turn to the Rabat I knew myself between 2010 and 2014, a city in which the distinctions of race had been almost entirely erased – but in which those of class and wealth remained acutely visible.

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In 1922 a French resident wrote of Rabat that “for the moment, Rabat still guards its special character ... that of a small, elegant provincial town where one is always happy to recover in the calm of privileged nature, green, and still full of poetic memories of past ages.” Amazingly, this seemed still true enough in the summer of 2010 when I first arrived in Rabat with my family. The twin cities of Rabat-Salé had in the 1920s a combined population of perhaps 50,000: today Rabat alone has 580,000 people and the combined greater metropolitan area, some 1.8 million. But in a strange way, Rabat has kept its magical green calm, its perfect scale and its touching beauty, despite this enormous growth. The medina and the *Nouvelle Ville* have grown together, interpenetrating comfortably enough, with the streets between the worn green square in front of the old Mairie and the city wall periodically filling up with African traders from Boulevard Hassan II, and then emptying again like a rock-pool at the ebb as the police re-impose their authority on the city's pavements.

For four years my office looked down onto Avenue Allal Bin Abdallah, a narrow street that leads from the Septième Art, that famous old cinema and garden café by the Banque du Maghreb, down to the Bawayba, the smallest gate in the Andalusian Wall. The street's buildings were a pleasantly shabby Art Deco, with plant-filled

balconies and swags of washing drying in the sun. On the scuffed green space opposite, overlooked by the coffee-drinkers at the Majestic, where the bees buzz in swarms about the pastries, regular demonstrations gathered. Once a week they would be the *chômeurs diplômés*, the graduate unemployed, marshalled by stewards in stencilled tabards, hopelessly chanting their demands for non-existent jobs in the civil service. From time to time the police would break up a demonstration, and a stream of young men and women, pursued by gendarmes with batons, would race up the street as the patrons of the Majestic and the Fine Brioche languidly uncrossed their legs and folded their newspapers. They took the same precautions, with half-closed eyes and quietly benign clucking as the overspill of worshippers and mats from the Molina mosque choked the side-streets for Friday prayers at noon. Coffee and sticky buns continued seamlessly, and the bees buzzed on.

There are three or four bookshops in the streets around, full of promise until closely examined, but capable of the occasional serendipitous surprise; and newspaper vendors who often deal in dog-eared books too; seductive 1950s shop fronts, vanishing fast; an ice-cream parlour called, irresistibly, the Tagadirt; shoe-cleaners who, until technology rendered them less useful, were all paid by the police to listen to the conversation of their polishees; and restaurants of varying degrees of pleasure. Most days, I'd have lunch at the Septième Art, in the pleasant garden beside the cinema (which looks like a gaily painted nuclear bunker) where topiary peacocks and elephants sway above rattan tables and evilly unhealthy, cheese-fraught meals emerge from a small kitchen, to be eaten with resentful pleasure on sunny afternoons.

This is the *Nouvelle Ville*, M Prost's *chef d'oeuvre*, and if you half close your eyes you can still see the wasteland of the Almohad enclosure rising towards the outer walls, the ghosts of narrow paths winding up through the scrub, small ruins and shabby cottages. The vines and oranges are gone, but there are other, surprising delights in the white-walled city that has displaced them. The cathedral of S-Pierre, tall and white and curiously constructed of vertical planes like wafers, was inaugurated by *le maréchal* in 1921 and sits in the middle of a refurbished piazza of rattling trams: from it can often be heard the strains of energetic singing in African languages (including, at one Christmas mass, an offertory hymn with the unexpected refrain "Wonga wonga wonga.") To the right are the great public buildings of Rabat, aligned along the Avenue Mohamed V – the Parliament, the faded Hotel Balima, the Post Office, the PTT, the Bank and the beautifully restored Art Deco Gare de Ville where the trains stop below ground level in a deep cutting, and leave by tunnel for Fes, Casablanca and Marakkech. On up the hill, beneath the fiercely pruned shade-trees on the pavements, one comes to the French cultural centre, and the city's last bookbinder, M Tazi, who is rich in goodwill but has much still to teach his apprentices about book-binding; and the ministries, not least Defence



where in the cool of the morning brass bands practice zealously but not always accurately behind the brown walls and the orange-trees.

The Sunna mosque stands at a forking of the ways, a great white building, stately and tall, built in the 1960s, the Muslim counterpart to S-Pierre. Here the funeral of Sheikh Abdessalame Yassine, the Islamist leader, took place in December 2012: Thousands of mourners paralyzed the city centre for hours, unreported in the press, ghosts as much as the smallholders and herdsman who lived here before Prost. Then the road runs up the wall of the Mechouar to the Bab Za'er. Little danger of being caught by tribesmen there today, but a breath-taking view across to Chella on its promontory, the rich green hillsides covered with unexpected dairy cows among the *marabouts'* tombs, and the drop to the Oued Bouregreg beyond. Behind you the Mechouar, the great palace compound, a huge open space of lawns and avenues, and neat buildings. The palace itself, with its golden doors, glitters in the distance, and all the ministries that need to be kept well under the eye of the King are neatly lined up, while guardsmen, boiling alive in red serge uniforms, march grimly to and fro.

Outside the Bab Za'er you can turn left for the Hasan Tower with its long-vanished tennis court, and the Royal Mausoleum where a sufi sheikh sits cross-legged night and day on his sheepskin reciting the Qu'ran. Also on the valley's edge is the British Residence where mosquitoes the size of golf-balls rise malignantly off the evening river to eat your ankles while you make diplomatic conversation in the garden. Turn right, on the other hand, as I used to do on my way home to Souissi, and you are heading south towards the plush suburbs, along the Avenue des Za'ers (there's nothing like defanging these impossible tribesmen and then celebrating them). Above you on your left is Yusufiya, once a worthy project for rehousing the inhabitants of the Douar Doum slums, now a solidly middle-class neighbourhood which offers discreetly, from the wasteland at its summit, one of the loveliest views I know, down onto the Oued Bouregreg with the *laqlaqs*, the storks, circling well below you on the thermals, above a chequerboard of rich greens and duns, returning home towards Chella at dusk.

Rabat is rich in views of extraordinary beauty. When you have feasted your eyes from the high place in Yusufiya, you can turn to Chella itself where the storks are returning. At evening they home in their hundreds, great flapping, clacking raggedy-winged *cadis-of-the-air*, to nest amongst the trees which they share with thousands of egrets. The best-known and most photographed stork in Morocco nests on Abul Hassan's minaret, but Chella is not just a resort for birds and tourists: it has a life of its own. On Fridays in good weather it is packed with a colourful throng of families from the *medina* with their picnics and push-chairs and noisily playful children. Women make fertility offerings of hard-boiled eggs to the

ancient eels in the water-tank, where, remarkably, an official sign declares the eel-pond a *lieu de culte*, (and Nina Epton records, in the 1950s, that “a queenly eel is said to rule over all the creatures of Chella that share her small, watery domain ... a queenly eel with long hair and earrings.”). Cats swarm everywhere. The fluorescent-green tombs of marabouts demand prayers and the lush vegetation of the Andalusian garden spills over its crumbling wall above the fecund black earth of the small farms running down to the river. And all is surrounded by high, crenellated walls that march tawny up the hillside surrounding this rough and lovely crucible of Rbati history.

For the next glorious view of Rabat you must go to the point, to the Qasbah des Oudayas, ancient *Hornachero* stronghold with its masonry held together by iron bindings and its cannons, the same that Mercier saw, poking mutely from the walls. Here, crossing the Souk al-Ghazel, you are faced with the astonishing Almohad gate, reached today by a majestic, long flight of steps that continues the line of the old rue des Consuls, where nineteenth-century dops hung their ostrich-plumed hats. You enter, dog-legging through the crooked passageway into the main street. Today the Qasbah is a maze of tiny, stepped alleyways and blue-painted walls reminiscent of a Greek island, but there was a time not so long ago when apart from the ancient mosque and *madrasa*, it contained “nothing but shacks of poor appearance or even simple *nouail* (huts) which shelter the Ouidaya contingents and their swarming families.” From the top, known as the semaphore platform, the view is overwhelming. In front of you the Atlantic beats on the town beach and the mole; to your left are the fortifications and bastions that run down the coast to the lighthouse and the smelly, squatted remains of Fort Hervé, behind them a hillside covered with thousand upon thousand of Muslim graves, a mosaic of colour and sun-warmed repose running up the slope to the Alou ridge. To your right, perhaps the most wonderful urban view you will ever see, across the deep blue Bouregreg estuary and the site of the once-dreaded bar, to the walls of Salé. Beyond the water and beyond the salt-flats on the Salé shore is another enormous cemetery where centuries of *salétins* and their saints have been interred, with the walls of the city rising behind them, an unbroken chain of towers and curtain surrounding the *medina* of Salé. The city rises above the lip of its walls to its great mosque and the streets and squares where once a year the pirate and mariners’ guilds still parade with vast ‘candles,’ each the size of a Fiat Cinquecento. There are very few views in the world to compare with Salé seen across the estuary, and it is a very fragile sight-line. A heliport control tower in front of the walls already gives Rabat the finger.

From the Alou I used to enjoy walking down through the medina, a *bain de foule* in which all the senses are overloaded – smell, sight, hearing and touch. The road along the Alou remains the only through-road for traffic in the *medina*, heavily

parked and noisily thronged. On one side of it are the cemeteries, still wonderful for meditative walks, falling away to the shore (Mercier's "destination of idlers, and all who like to dream, of whichever race"); on the other, also falling gently, the quieter residential streets of the *medina*, where tall, blank walls still hide islands of traditional, even Andalusian, life, and tiled doorways with clumsily classical architraves offer small glimpses through beaded curtains of courtyards and corridors. You can still walk down the *horm* of *Ridjal Eç-Çoff* - now called Sidi Fateh for one of the Throng in a process of saintly synecdoche - though you won't get roughed up under the pretty harbour once feared by Jews and Christians.

Eventually you reach the Souaika, the long, disjointed cross-street that forms the core of the markets, roofed in palm-mats, floored in God-only-knows-what and selling everything you could imagine wanting, from fake Mancunian teapots to the olive-oil soap that looks like axle-grease; from straw hats to tortoises and from *babouches* to bundles of mint, pirate DVDs of every film ever made in Hollywood or Casablanca, and counterfeit sunglasses. You can stop outside the mosque and try a sliver of braised cow's face or ankle, or you can stock up with pastries, underwear or painted woodwork. Eventually you will tumble out, perhaps through the Bab el-Bahri by the old Mellah, down to where the Customs House stood in Rabat's trading days; or out of the Bab Chella (named for those very distant times when you'd set out from here on your pony, perhaps in a solar topee and escorted by a pair of soldiers, to cross the wild, Za'er-infested country to the outer wall and the necropolis of Abul Hassan). Outside the Bab Chella today is the wide expanse of Prost's *cordon sanitaire*, its railway long ago transferred into tunnels further up the town, now called Avenue Hassan II, frantic with buses, taxis and pedestrians, cyclists, *sans-papiers* and shoe-cleaners; and beyond it once again the *Nouvelle Ville*, that pleasant, green-and-white city in which, just occasionally, I am tempted to see echoes of Celesteville, capital of the elephants. Which brings my wandering mind back, once again, to Pliny.

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It was a fascinating and very emotional time to live in Rabat. Politically, it was the moment of the so-called 'Arab Spring,' and the hopes and fears of Morocco's clever, passionate but often unhappy people coursed up and down these narrow lanes and broad boulevards, sometimes pursued by gendarmes with batons – but that is another, and different, story. As for the city itself, it stands on the edge of a precipice of change. Very soon after I first reached Rabat, three big urban projects were completed and inaugurated. The Pont Hassan II, a great arc of concrete, not unlovely in itself, linked Rabat and Salé, changing the dynamics of the region dramatically. No more ferries, and no longer the old bridge designed to take traffic round, rather than through, Salé as it headed for Fes – suddenly the two old

sparring-partners are drawn firmly together by this new umbilical cord, and their long-running open marriage is being – as it were - concretised. Commuters pour over the bridge in the morning and the evening, many of them in the new tram – *al-tramway* – that is the second of the great urban projects. *Al-tramway* was not without its problems. Priced, like so much of the new Rabat, for the middle class rather than the poor, it was also an alarming novelty to Rbati pedestrians, and a warden with flags had to be posted at every intersection and crossing for several months after it opened, to avoid as many as possible of the inevitable collisions. Teething-troubles overcome, it functions well, though taxi-drivers grumble at the loss of road, and sensitive souls at the wraparound Macdonalds advertisements that it drags through the city.

The third of the great projects was the tunnel under the Qasbah des Oudayas, a huge road diversion that takes the honking, roaring traffic away from Souk al-Ghazel and the thoroughfare it had become, and pipes it under the Qasbah, and out onto the coast. This of course brings blessed relief to the *medina*, though it makes it almost impossible to get a taxi there at night; and forms the completing link in the coast road that runs along the edge of the estuary and down the sea-coast to the lighthouse and beyond.

These three signs of change pale into insignificance beside what is now being built and planned. It is said that King Hassan II was stern in his determination to preserve the view across the valley to Salé, and his grave in the family mausoleum looks out across the valley. But by the time I left Rabat in 2014 there was little but digging and building in the Bouregreg valley, and Phase 1 of the new development, made up of marina and shopping opportunities and pastel-coloured housing, was already in place on the flood-plain. Marshes gave way to fields in the twentieth century: now the fields must give way in turn to concrete, and great placards read smugly ‘Where Rabat meets Salé.’ The planning is ambitious and involves the infill of much of the valley with housing, ‘leisure facilities’ and public buildings.

There is to be a new cultural centre for Rabat, centred on a Grande Théâtre by Zaha Hadid. In a 3D maquette of the whole development, Ms Hadid’s theatre looks like an enormous marshmallow that has been sat upon by a careless, perhaps Plinian, elephant. The developers are as pleased as punch with the whole thing, which is budgeted at 9,000,000,000 dirhams, and will take shape between 2014 and 2020: “Phase 2, which will cover about 110 hectares, is located on a site already exceptionally well served by the tramway, the road and motorway network, and only ten minutes from Rabat international airport. Which is to say that the project fits into the logic of cultural and touristic attraction.” Rabat-Salé intends to attract 4 million tourists a year by 2020. To service their needs there will be not only Ms Hadid’s Grand Théâtre, but a new museum of archæology and earth science,

‘thematized promenades’ by the river and lots of hotels. As well, of course, as another marina (“it is hard to imagine the refurbishment of the Bouregreg valley without a marina ...”), 105,000 square metres of office space and a house-building programme “which combines futuristic and traditional buildings with typical touches of the old medina.”

This new quarter will be “a real hyphen between culture and the general public. That’s the principle mission for the five cultural centres in the Bouregreg valley.” I’m not entirely clear how this rhetorical hyphen will operate in joining culture and the general public, but I suppose the latter will pour down from both banks to throng the facilities provided by the former. And of course they will. It would be churlish to question the appetite for a ‘proper’ capital city – after all, the glories of old Rabat, the “the calm of privileged nature, green, and still full of poetic memories of past ages,” are probably more valued by presumptuous birds of passage like me than by many Rbatis (though I know quite a few who squirm at what is happening to the ‘Pearl of Morocco’). More disturbing, given the failure of the French to address it under the Protectorat, is the segregation of rich and poor, the chasm of affordability that bisects Moroccan society – and its cities.

I very much hope it works well and gives real satisfaction to Rbatis of all classes, because the price that Rabat is paying is a high one, in the permanent loss of the almost inexpressibly lovely views of Salé’s walls across the salt-flats, and of the slow-moving river flowing gently through the patchwork of small green fields with the *laqlaqs* clacking in the trees and the fishermen languidly casting their nets from their fishing-boats, as they have for so many centuries.

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