

*Power in Stone:  
Cities as Symbols of Empire*  
GEOFFREY PARKER

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*Power in Stone: Cities as Symbols of Empire* is an ambitious work that analyzes the display of power of some of the world's great empires reflected in the monumental architecture, layout, and design of their capital cities. The book covers tremendous ground analyzing imperial capitals from Europe to East Asia over the course of the last two and a half millennia. Its most significant contribution arises from author Geoffrey Parker's analysis in one volume of so many seemingly different imperial capitals, revealing the many commonalities in the symbolic display of power across cultural, geographic, and temporal divides.

In the prologue, Parker suggests that the development of human civilization is closely intertwined with the development of cities. As centers of population and material wealth, cities also became the seats of political power, controlling the surrounding areas from which they commanded the resources essential for their existence. Some of these cities became the capitals of empires as rulers gained control over ever larger territories and diverse groups of subjects. The imperial capitals the author analyzes were purpose built as symbols of the power of the empire, becoming "tangible expressions of the might and magnificence of those who wielded it" (p. 15). According to Parker,

the primary purpose of these cities was to impress, intimidate, and ultimately influence the behavior of those who beheld them. These arguments are at the center of the volume's purpose, which is to reveal how imperial capitals worked to achieve and maintain power, translating the vision of their rulers into stone.

The volume is composed of 15 chapters, with each focusing on either one particular city or on a group of cities related in their symbolic expression or heritage. Even though each imperial capital often varies widely in specific aspects of architecture and design, several common forms immediately begin to emerge. The opening chapter on Persepolis is particularly effective at introducing many of these commonalities. The city was a new capital built to reflect the great achievements of a new empire, and its location was chosen through a "powerful combination of mythological, historical, and geographical factors" (p. 21). In Persepolis, the clear use of monumental architecture, dramatic processual approaches, and images of domination are clearly meant to overawe and intimidate any who approach the king. Parker reveals in later chapters numerous other examples of imperial cities that deploy similar symbols of imperial power. For instance, Shah Jahan's new capital built near Delhi includes a dramatic processual way that leads to the heart of the empire, the massive Red Fort (chap. 6). Like Persepolis, Parker notes that the site of this capital was chosen not only because of its strategic position within India but also because of its historical association

with the military victories of earlier imperial powers—something the British would recognize and take advantage of centuries later when they built their own imperial capital nearby (chap. 11).

Beyond the monumental, geographical, and historical significance of imperial capitals, Parker elucidates several additional common symbolic elements. These elements include the use of precise geometric designs that concretize the symbolic center from which power emanates. The use of geometric design in this way is dramatically demonstrated by the palace of Versailles where Louis XIV's bedchamber existed at the heart of the palace, the government, and the kingdom, mirroring the place of the sun at the heart of the solar system (chap. 8). These designs underlie the cosmological views of the rulers of empire and are often directly related to state religions. Parker argues that until the 20th century, when the role of religion was taken over by ideology, imperial capitals were often built to reflect the direct relationship between the secular and the celestial. For example, the construction of the then-largest Christian church at the center of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople, the Hagia Sophia, demonstrated the "splendor of the new Christian empire and its theocratic character" (p. 35). Similarly, the Timurid capital of Shakhrisabz centered on the massive White Palace and had an equally large mosque at the opposite end of a great avenue (chap. 4). These buildings supported the two pillars upon which the empire was built: military and religious dominance. The buildings added physical substance to the claim of the dynasty's founder, Timur Lenk, to be the "Shadow of Allah on Earth" (p. 74). Parker argues that the symbolic marriage of secular and reli-

gious power in all of these capitals worked to establish, justify, and maintain the power of the empire. By digging beneath the outward expression of very unique architectural and building traditions, Parker's work is significant because the many examples used to support these arguments reveal that imperial power is often consolidated and displayed in nearly identical ways across time and space despite deep cultural differences.

While Parker works to expose the many common symbols deployed in imperial capitals, he is also careful to note that the very different forms of each city also reflect the particular aims of the autocratic rulers who created them. The author argues that the Forbidden City was a reflection of Chinese notions of feng shui and of Confucian concepts of government, even though it was built on the ruins of a former Mongol capital with very different sociospatial orientations (chap. 5). Similarly, St. Petersburg was built to embody the new imperial vision of Tsar Peter I and his attempt to shift Russia's focus away from the East and Orthodox Christianity toward the West and European modernity (chap. 9). Conversely, Akbar's new and relatively open city of Fatehpur Sikri, with its mix of architectural styles, was meant to convey the "fusion of Muslims and Hindus and put his empire on firmer foundations" (p. 109).

The preponderance of evidence brought to bear on the subject matter is impressive, but the reader is left wondering what the true effect of these projects were on powerful neighboring polities and—of concern to many historical archaeologists—on the empire's own people. How effective were these symbols in "overawing" and "intimidating" subjects of the empire? The wielding of power is not always so straightforward and

unidirectional. As anthropology and archaeological research have endeavored to show, state power is often resisted and appropriated in various ways and its symbols repurposed for subversive ends. Indeed, power is often very fleeting as Parker takes care to point out. As he notes, it is striking that a mere 78 years after Louis XIV's death, his heirs were removed from the palace of Versailles and guillotined by those very people the palace was meant to overawe and intimidate. While Parker does offer insights into the appropriation of symbols by new rulers, the volume is decidedly about the way in which power flows from the top down and not necessarily its reception by nonelite social actors. That is, it is a compelling

analysis of the way *rulers* imagine their place in the world and the cosmos and how this imagination of power becomes symbolized in the stone of their imperial capitals. The greatest strength of the volume lies in its erudite yet accessible analysis of such a wide array of temporally and geographically disparate imperial cities and in the author's ability to expose and compare the underlying symbolism common to each of them. It should therefore be of great interest to anyone interested in imperial history, power, and urbanization.

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