

Eugen Wirth (1925-2012) – Geographer of the Oriental City in North Africa and the Middle East

Anton Escher

The article is a personal review of the scientific work of Eugen Wirth. It briefly highlights the essential aspects of the role of Eugen Wirth in the German community of geographers during the last decades of the 20th century. The text focuses on his scientific work concerning the “Oriental City”. Eugen Wirth’s publications on the *Oriental City* consist of

empirical work and mapping in innumerable old quarters of Islamic cities. Also, this close-up documents his influence on scientists in various disciplines, not only geographers.

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Eugen Wirth (1925-2012), Professor of Geography, was based at the Institute of Geography at the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg from 1964 to 1991. In the 1970s and 1980s, Eugen Wirth was a member of a more or less existing informal professorial circle, which organized and determined the dynamics of content, finances and personnel in the German-speaking geographical scientific landscape to a considerable extent. It seems not only impossible, but also extremely difficult to discuss the content-related effects and scientific influences of the *Ordinarius* of Geography distanced from today’s perspective and as his last academic student. In consequence, his substantial scientific publications are the only basis to discuss his achievements. Thereby I follow the constantly expressed opinion of my seriously respected teacher (despite insurmountable differences after the young scholar had distanced himself from his mentor): „All that remains of us as scientists are our publications“¹, he said to me several times during joint research stays. In this sense, Eugen Wirth notes a key position in his self-written scientific curriculum vitae „freely according to Plutarch: If I have written a good book, it should be my monument“ (Wirth, “Lebenslauf” 3). For this reason, the following sections will attempt to use his own

written statements to discuss Eugen Wirth's work on the *Oriental City*.

The Oriental City - the Scientific Protégé of Eugen Wirth

In accordance with other German-speaking geographers from that period, Eugen Wirth's scientific interest was broadly diversified and based on his studies of geography, history, philosophy, and sociology. His academic curiosity extended to theoretical explanations of geography at large, theoretical explanations and practical examples of regional geography, planning problems of traffic routes, and statements about wine and carpets. In addition, he was particularly concerned with different ways of life in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. His publications list immediately demonstrates that the phenomenon known as the *Oriental City* was his research topic par excellence. This can be attributed to the fact that German-speaking geography interpreted North Africa and the Middle East as the "Orient" (with Eugen Wirth as the scientific leader), shaped by the ways of life of the *city dwellers*, *nomads*, and *peasants*. In the second half of the 20th century, this perspective on forms of life was shared implicitly among the scholarly *orient researchers* of German-speaking geography. In his self-

perception, Eugen Wirth states: "In the course of more than thirty years, during which I worked on the cities of the Middle East and North Africa, I have written five books and almost fifty essays on questions of the Oriental-Islamic city." (*Orientalische Stadt* XIX). With this statement, he underlines the importance of the subject for his various empirical research. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Eugen Wirth not only significantly influenced urban research on North Africa and the Middle East, but also contributed to a reinvention of all modern, contemporary, and interdisciplinary Middle East research.

The Starting Point of Any Research on the Oriental City Is the Thematic Map

Eugen Wirth began his research on the city in the "Orient" at a time when - in addition to ethnographers, Orientalists, and linguists - archaeologists and historians from former colonial nations were studying this topic. The methodological approach of these predominantly humanities disciplines was based mainly on European-language writing traditions in texts and books as well as on interpretable artefacts. In addition, their explanations usually remained on a metaphorical and *flowery* level. Eugen Wirth distanced himself from this tendency and put another emphasis on his access to knowledge: "In

contrast, the author deliberately places more emphasis on so-called realities and material culture, which can be proven by empirical field research." (*Orientalische Stadt* 12). As common in geography, the map was his fundamental instrument of analysis, documentation, and knowledge generation. In the course of time, this turn to materiality, to empiricism, and thus to the exact mapping of life-worldly phenomena as a methodological strategy of understanding became almost a manic idea of the Erlangen geographer.

Eugen Wirth did not fail to explain the significance and effects of the imperative of thematic mapping. "The constant compulsion to precisely localize the observed or ascertained facts and the compulsion to fill gaps still existing in the map image, work across borders, opens up questions and aspects that remain closed to other scientific disciplines" (Escher and Wirth 12). Quoting the German historian C. Haase, Eugen Wirth emphasized that empirical work on site goes far beyond knowledge gained from the written and traditional texts: "If gaps in the written text can simply be concealed or covered up by mentioning other facts, they are clearly brought to the fore when working on a map" (Escher and Wirth 12). However, Eugen Wirth was also aware that maps

alone were not adequate: “In cultural geography, mappings without parallel surveys, interviews, etc. are limited in their significance” (Escher and Wirth 10). Overall, his publications on the *Oriental City*, almost without exception, show a tendency toward the subjects of architecture and archaeology. In the latter, Eugen Wirth was also very active in science policy. Among other things, he was notably involved in the opening of the German Archaeological Institute in Damascus.

As his outstanding publications on Isfahan/Iran (Gaube and Wirth, *Isfahan*), Aleppo, Syria (Gaube and Wirth, *Aleppo*), Sanaa, Yemen (Kopp and Wirth), Dubai, UAE (Wirth, *Dubai*) and Fez, Morocco (Escher and Wirth) show, descriptive documentations in the form of comprehensive mapping of the cities of the “Orient” have been his main activity. Furthermore, the exact inventory of the functional and representative buildings of these places can be seen as his central legacy. Besides these cities, Eugen Wirth was probably the scientist who knew most (possibly almost all) cities in North Africa and the Middle East from his own experience: “The author has certainly personally experienced a three-digit number of cities in all parts of North Africa and the Middle East and mapped dozens of cities himself”

(*Orientalische Stadt* 11). This demonstrates that Eugen Wirth implicitly pursued the strategy of scientific geographical comparison, a synopsis, so to speak, of countless cities in the region. Based on his field visits, experiences, and mappings, the synthetically-analytically conceived model-like phenomenon, the *Oriental City*, emerged.

Eugen Wirth's Attempt at a Theory of the Oriental City

Ancient Oriental cities, Islam, and architecture were, in distorting brevity, the concepts and references in Eugen Wirth's attempted modelling and theory building of the *Oriental City*. Also in his last writings, Eugen Wirth looked at the *Oriental City* historically, starting from an ancient city complex. Against this background, he firmly insisted on the assumption that the religion of Islam had no significant impact on the design and planning of the *Oriental City*. Eugen Wirth merely allowed Islam the task of spatial expansion: “It would be conceivable that Islam as a religion did not substantially shape the *Oriental City*, but that the legal and social order connected with it contributed decisively to the spread of the manifestations of the city as it developed in the Old Orient throughout the world dominated by Islam” (*Orientalische Stadt Überblick* 88).

I do not adhere to these explanations, which form the theoretical basis for the descriptive and functional model of the *Oriental City* (well known in German-speaking countries and in didactic mediation). Briefly sketched, the model consists of the following material elements: disintegrated city layout, dead-end street structure, courtyard house, and (ethnically) separated quarters. In addition, there is the defensive function of the city, which protects the citizens on the one hand from insecurities from within (arising from the city governor and various ethnic groups) and on the other hand from latent threats from outside (e.g. nomads). This is visible in the architecture of the houses as well as in the citadel, walls and gates. The social, political, and religious rules and norms are reflected in the design of large architectural complexes (e.g. bazaar, mosque with bath and oven) that are considered a characteristic feature of the Oriental-Islamic city. The design of the city points out a strict separation of public and private spheres (Wirth, *Konzeption*). Eugen Wirth described the central souq or bazaar, the commercial center of the city, as one of the enormous independent cultural achievements of the Islamic Middle Ages (“Zum Problem des Bazars”). For him, it is the only fundamental distinguishing ele-

Anton Escher

studied geography, philosophy and Islamic studies at the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg. In 1985, he did his Ph.D. with an empirical thesis on the Kingdom of Morocco and habilitated in 1990 with a study on the regional development of the Syrian Arab Republic. Since 1996 he is working as Professor of Cultural Geography at the Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) in Mainz. Anton Escher is Director of the Institute of Geography and Director of the Center for Intercultural Studies at JGU. His academic focus lies on historical Arab cities, feature films and geography, diaspora and migration as well as cultural mediation and intercultural communication.
email: A.Escher@geo.uni-mainz.de

ment of the Oriental-Islamic city (*Orientalische Stadt* 517-527).

Unfortunately, his works do not go beyond these descriptive models. Thus, I formulated earlier with reference to other academic students of Eugen Wirth: “The Oriental City as the definite icon of the classical Oriental geographers, (co-) invented by Klaus Dettmann, has been unmasked by Herbert Popp as an ‘almost impermissible generalization’ and by Frank Meyer as a ‘historically relevant special case’” (Escher 143). The explanations and the theoretically generalized approaches remain on the level of materiality and of binary social and political concepts. Unfortunately, in his theoretical reflections on the *Oriental City*, Eugen Wirth also ignores numerous local and international researchers (e.g. Eckert) who deal with religious regulations, legal concepts, or cultural practices as explanatory factors for the form of the Oriental City.

Academic Effects and Potential Yield of Eugen Wirth's Studies

Eugen Wirth was an academic scholar with outstanding personal commitment in motivating and supporting younger colleagues from all disciplines. From the 1970s to the end of the 2010s, numerous publications on the city in North Africa and

the Middle East have made it impossible for them not to thank Eugen Wirth in their prefaces. Regardless of the discipline, whether ethnology, architecture, history, or sociology, authors and scholars did not fail to express their gratitude to the mentor of German Oriental geography for his advice. For example, Elke Niewöhner-Eberhard thanked Eugen Wirth for encouraging her to continue her work over nine years (1), Dorothee Sack for his critical questions since the beginning of her work and for “thankfully reviewing the manuscript several times”, (IX) and finally Stefan Weber, director of the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, “for his unreserved support”. (12).

The gratitude toward and recognition of Eugen Wirth is supplemented by absolute admiration for his mapping, whether by the American ethnologist Dale F. Eickelman, who characterized the maps of Fez as “outstanding”, (100) or by Said Ennahid, Professor of Islamic Art, Architecture, and Archaeology at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, who recently wrote about Eugen Wirth's publication on Fez that he was “very much impressed by the quality and details of your maps” (Ennahid). In the end, Eugen Wirth's impulses, motivations, and suggestions will continue to have an impact on

scientists from a wide range of disciplines in the humanities. Although his theoretical explanations can and should be discussed critically, the exact, fascinating, and unique cartographic recordings and the architectural inventories of the *Oriental City* are important documents of their cultural heritage. Not only the scientific community, but also the inhabitants of and visitors to the old towns in North Africa and the Middle East have to be grateful to the geographer Eugen Wirth for his work and efforts.

Notes

¹ All quotations are translated from German into English language.

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