1 Calle de los Arcos

Burroughs arrived in Tangier from Gibraltar via short stay in Rome the first week of January 1954, but surprisingly little is known about where he first lived. We know its address—1 Calle de los Arcos—and that it was a male brothel where he rented a room from Anthony Reisthorst, or, as Burroughs described him that April, "Tony, the old Dutch man who runs this whore house I live in" (*Letters* 203). To the best of my knowledge, there are no photographs, either taken by Burroughs at the time or by later researchers, and no markers of Calle de los Arcos on any map.

After staying in hotels his first few weeks in Tangier, Burroughs moved into Dutch Tony's in early February—around the time of his fortieth birthday—on the ninth of the month reporting to Ginsberg that he had "a room in best district for 50 cents per day" (196). Where was this "best district"? Burroughs' biographers merely agree that his room was "near the Socco Chico" (Miles 62; Morgan 239), in the centre of the medina. The first time I arrived in Tangier, some thirty years after Burroughs, this was the place I went in search of first.

There wasn't much to go on back in the mid-1980s. This was before either of the Burroughs biographies, or literary histories of Tangier by the likes of Ian Finlayson, who I met out there researching his book, or even the first Rough Guide to Morocco, and long before the maps and data available on the internet. Until I found an old French map of the medina which lacked any street names—most of which had, in any event, been changed since the old International Zone days—all I had to go on was what I hoped to pick up from the local Tanjawis.

Mediocre French will get you places in the nouvelle ville of Tanger, but in the medina to speak with anyone old enough to remember the 1950s, or who might know where to find Calle de los Arcos, you needed Spanish, which I didn't have. Then again, what help could you expect in following a trail three decades cold? And what was I looking for? The house of a Westerner who had lived in Tangier in the last days of its colonial rule mainly to take advantage of drugs and young boys, and whose fame rested on a blasphemous book…

IN THE SOCCO CHICO

What I had not reckoned with in Tangier were the "guides" who offered their services at every turn. Some twenty years on, I forget exactly how it came about, but to my astonishment one of these guides in the Socco Chico answered my query by immediately pointing a few yards away from where we were standing. Just to the right of the Café Central, the café of choice for Burroughs and his generation, there was a small opening. The blue plaque on the wall read: Calle del Arco.

Fig 1. Calle del Arco

This little tunnel was not it, I quickly realised. After twenty feet, the depth of the Café Central, Calle del Arco opened onto a small cross street, Khayatine, that in turn connected two long alleys, Rue des Chrétiens (or Rue des Almohades) on the left side and Rue de Commerce on the right. (The mix of old French or Spanish names and new Arab ones was, I discovered, an added confusion, both a mundane fact and a curious perversity, as if the city refused to be fixed by being named. Needless to say, in Burroughs' letters, Tangier is never simply Tangier, but also Tanger, Tangiers…) Standing in this dark tunnel, it was obvious there was simply no space here for Dutch Tony's, and besides, this wasn't "near" the Socco Chico; it was effectively in it.

Undeterred, I decided to rise early each morning—before the medina alleyways became impossibly crowded—armed with a notebook, pencil, and camera, to map the entire place, if that's what it took to follow in Burroughs' steps.

MAPPING THE MEDINA

Although the medina has many entrances—via Rue d'Italie on its west side, the Kasbah to the north, the port gates to the east—the natural starting point was the sprawling open space of the Socco Grande, which lies immediately below the medina and stands between it and the boulevards of the nouvelle ville built by the French after the turn of the century. Passing through the forty-foot high horseshoe archway of the Bab el Fahs, you enter the medina, heading north and east, downhill towards the Socco Chico along the Rue es Siaghines—the Street of the Silversmiths, which was lined with money changers in the International Zone era. This is the most deceptive street in the medina. The only route straight and broad enough for a car, it gives no hint to the Westerner of the transformed experience of space (and, thereby, time) that lies in wait beyond it.

Even on the empty alleyways of early mornings, space in the medina shrinks extraordinarily, becomes broken up into fragments of unaccustomed density, as the path suddenly shifts from sunlight to obscurity and twists so frequently and unexpectedly that you rarely see more than a few dozen yards ahead. After a year of living inside the medina, Burroughs wrote that: "Tangier seems to exist on several dimensions. You are always finding streets, squares, parks you never saw before" (*Interzone* 58). But the opposite is equally true, and just as uncanny: going around in circles, you find yourself back at the same places again and again. To know the medina is a labyrinth tells you nothing about this experience of space-time—but, looking back, it was this disorientation that my early map fragments tried to master.

Fig. 2 Map of Socco Grande leading into the medina

Fig. 3 Map of west side of the medina from rue es Siaghines

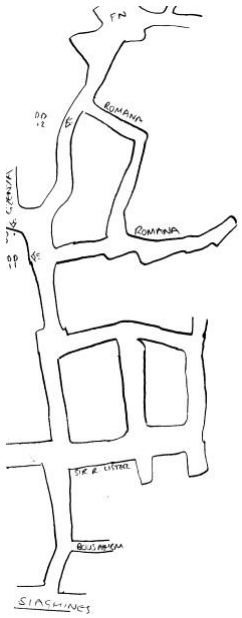


Fig 4. Map of west side of the medina from rue d'Italie

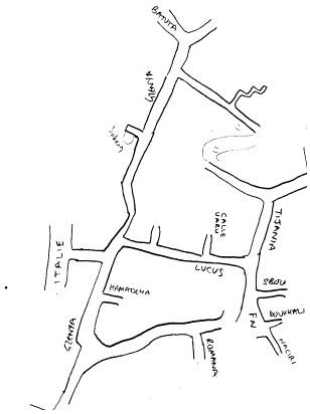


Fig. 5 Map of south side of the medina

Fig. 6 Map of Socco Chico and south medina

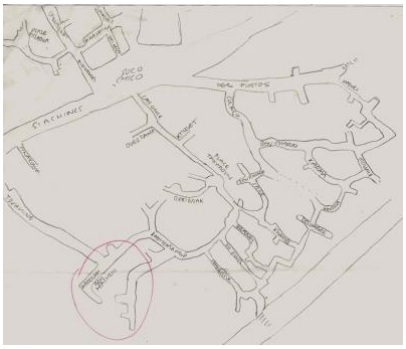


Fig. 7 Map of Socco Chico and south, detail, Calle del Arco

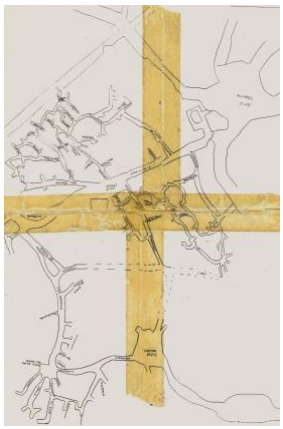


Fig. 8 Maps of medina scotch-taped together

READING THE SIGNS

At a certain point I must have pulled back from this insane digression, this hopeless ambition to map it all, long enough to ask again the whereabouts of Calle de los Arcos. I don't remember the man who led me there, but I can recall my initial exasperation. For I had passed the opening of this tiny alley a dozen times as I walked along the bustling Rue Naciri (or Calle Naciria), and even noted down its name (see top of figure 2) without making the connection: Rue El Kouasse—a plausible transposition of "los Arcos." Quite literally, I had not known how to read the signs.

Fig. 9 Rue El Kouasse plaque.

Fig. 10 Map of Calle de los Arcos area, identifying photographs

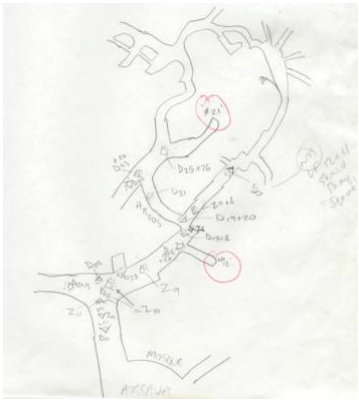


Fig. 11 View up Calle de los Arcos from Calle Naciria. Where the young girl is standing is the doorway to Number 1

Fig. 12 View up Calle de los Arcos from Calle Naciria

Fig. 13 View down Naciria towards Calle de los Arcos (on left)

Fig. 14 View up Naciria towards Calle de los Arcos (on right)

Fig. 15 View down Calle de los Arcos from Calle Necharin towards Naciria

A HOLE IN SPACE-TIME

As I took photographs and mapped every twist, turn, and blind alley in the vicinity, I tried to picture Burroughs living here, in the lower west side of the medina of Tangier. He had stayed for some eight months altogether—from February to early September 1954 and again, after three months away in the United States, from early December to early January 1955. Here it was that he'd fallen into despair in Spring 1954, when Ginsberg, travelling in Mexico, failed to respond to his daily letters—letters that rehearsed the frantic early routines that went into *Naked Lunch*. It was here that he endured the crisis of his addiction to Eukodol, so acute he paid a fellow lodger, Eric Gifford, to confiscate his clothes and prevent him leaving to buy more from the farmacias. And it was here that he had written numerous short pieces that never made it into *Naked Lunch*, later published in the *Interzone* collection, such as "The Finger" or "In the Café Central" and "International Zone."

I tried to picture Burroughs' life in this tiny alleyway, but my imagination failed me. Perhaps the medina was just too alien to my experience, or the years that had passed and the distance between myself and Burroughs were simply too great. Perhaps this Rue El Kouasse wasn't even Calle de los Arcos after all.

My mapmaking grew ever more complicated, and was eventually traced, together with markers of my many hundreds of photographs, onto the old French map of the medina I later discovered.

Fig. 16 Old French map of medina

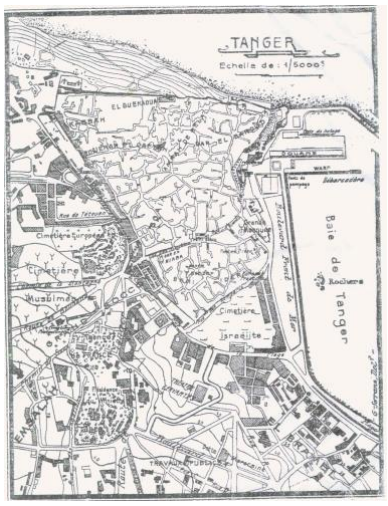
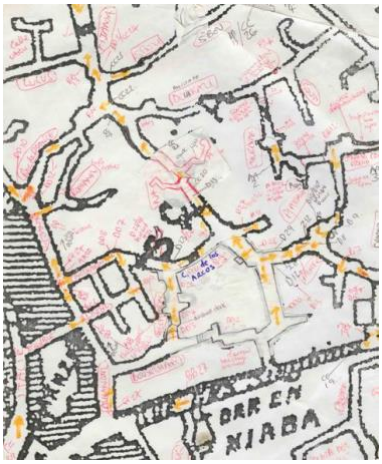


Fig. 17 Map of lower left side medina



In pursuit of El Hombre Invisible, I had filled in almost all the blanks on the map, but created a paper labyrinth with an irretrievable hole in space-time at its centre. Only yeas later, reading and re-reading *Naked Lunch*, did I come to think of this as entirely fitting, indeed, for me at least, the only possible response.