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978-0-521-70140-2 - The City in the Roman West, c. 250 BC-c. AD 250

Ray Laurence, Simon Esmonde Cleary and Gareth Sears

Excerpt

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Introduction

The city is a wonderfully complex entity; it can be defined as either a physical space of architecture, or as a people living in a single place, or as both of these. Within these definitions a myriad other elements emerge that make the city a very slippery object of analysis. This is as true of the multiple entities categorised as ‘the Roman city’ as it is of any other urban form. Indeed, the idea that there was a single category, ‘the Roman city’, in the western half of the Mediterranean basin throughout the period of almost half a millennium that is the subject of this book, does not stand up to more than a few seconds’ scrutiny. Indeed, one of the central tenets of this book is that what we see across this huge area and long time-scale is the working out by numerous local communities of their relationship to Rome as expressed through the almost infinite variations on common themes of urban form and urban structures which were first generated in Italy and then adopted and adapted in the provinces. Moreover, analysis of the Roman city has been shaped by a series of explicit and often implicit theoretical positions rather than by any single agreed narrative or type of explanation. Some of these positions have been articulated with reference to social theory, although much that is written on the Roman city has relied on empiricism and reference to an undefined ‘common sense’. The Roman city has also featured in debates among scholars of the Roman Empire over Romanisation (and resistance), imperialism, the economy, cultural identity, discrepant experience, and phenomenology, to name but a few.¹ We do not intend to rehearse these general debates here,² nor to summarise the views of other authors (references are provided and these can be read at first hand). Instead we wish here to explain our view of the Roman city in the light of these discussions in order to articulate the conceptual and theoretical positions which underpin the chapters that follow.

¹ See for example on Romanisation: Mattingly (2004) for the provinces needs to be read with Mouritsen (1998), pp. 69–86 on Romanisation in Italy; on imperialism: Mouritsen (1998); papers in Mattingly (1997); see also Laurence (2001a).

² It would in any case fill a whole book: see Hingley (2005).

THE CITY AND ROMANISATION

For the last century cities have been considered by scholars to be the backbone of the Roman Empire, and it is safe to say that a Roman Empire without cities was an historical impossibility. Archaeologically, Roman cities can be identified right across western Europe and North Africa because of common (which is certainly not to say uniform and universal) features of their layout and the provision of monumental buildings and the functions those buildings discharged (e.g. street-grids, fora, baths, theatres, temples). What is particularly interesting is that in some areas the city had not existed in the Roman form prior to their incorporation into the Roman Empire, and, even where the city had existed previously, as, for example, in Italy and North Africa, we find a complete transformation of the urban form during the two centuries after 200 BC.

Roman urbanism had a dynamic to it that can be understood in terms of change and development – whether in the city of Rome, in Pompeii, or in Colchester. A hundred years ago, Francis Haverfield (author of *Ancient Town Planning*) and his colleagues would have viewed these changes in the light of their own experience of the workings of contemporary European empires and their understanding of cultural change.³ Haverfield viewed the Roman city as part of a natural evolution, in which the savage barbarians became more ‘civilised’ and adopted a pure form of urbanism based on small-scale settlements with planned straight streets and an architecture that engaged not only with taste in ancient Rome, but also with the taste for modern neo-classical architecture that dominated the major cities of Europe and the United States of America in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴ The ideas from the observation of the modern city underpinning this interpretation of the Roman city were also closely associated with the spread of the city and the development of a concept of cultural change called ‘Romanisation’ – a term that was to shape the way the spread of Roman material culture in the past was understood throughout the twentieth century. Much, or even too much, has been written on the subject of Romanisation; but, intriguingly, relatively little has been said about the role of the city in the process of cultural change.⁵ When, however, we view the urban development of a particular geographical area over time, it is clear that, although towns were founded and new architectural forms may have appeared in the century following conquest by Rome, the process of

³ Freeman (1997) and (2007). ⁴ Laurence (1994). ⁵ Although see now Revell (2009).

town-building and urban development seems to have ceased or slowed down over time. Moreover, not everywhere in the Roman Empire developed cities to the same extent or with the same speed. For example, in Africa cities continued to add new monuments right through the third century AD, whereas some areas of Gaul at this time were undergoing major transformations in urban form and functions. Even within a single province we can identify quite different trajectories of urban development. These patterns are set out in this book and lead us to conclude that urban development did not coincide with an inevitable process of evolution spreading out from the Mediterranean as conceived by Haverfield and others a century ago.

The last two decades have seen an unpicking of the very idea of Romanisation. It has changed from denoting a process of acculturation of an elite-led society, according to which both provincials and Romans (however defined) became different, towards representing a more dynamic vision of cultural expression within the Roman Empire, according to which individuals engaged or disengaged with the dominant culture of Romanness in quite different and even undefined ways to produce a physical manifestation of their identity.⁶ This approach allows us to envisage a global idea of Roman culture that was viewed differently according to the perspective of the individual. This view of cultural change under the Roman Empire at the level of the individual works rather well, if read from an inscribed tombstone, but becomes more problematic when dealing with collective entities such as cities. A city was by its nature a co-operative venture that required not just monuments and cemeteries but also a population which ensured its survival over a longer period than the life-span of a single individual. A man or a woman could contribute to the development of a city by building a temple, a forum, a theatre, or an amphitheatre – an action that can be read in the light of the newly defined emphasis on individual identity within the discipline of Roman archaeology. What is more difficult to read, however, is the development of a collective ideology or local *mentalité* over a time span longer than a single generation, and that saw a city as a physical entity and/or *habitus* ('lived environment'), which should be attractive and desirable and through which the population's collective identity could be manifested and displayed to outsiders.⁷ In the context of a recently created province, the Roman city may have been viewed as a novelty, perhaps already experienced by some provincial inhabitants as a result of travel to other parts of the Roman Empire. At the same time, the knowledge that

⁶ Now fully discussed in Revell (2009).

⁷ As posited recently by Creighton (2006) and Revell (2009).

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cities were being developed by neighbouring social groups would have increased the speed with which Roman urban forms were adopted or adapted locally. The impulse to construct a city, in whatever form, need not have been connected to a conscious understanding of cultural difference or a conscious choice to become more Roman. Indeed, it may be that the cultural form of the city, with its charter and regulations, presented a new set of opportunities to create not just identity but a sense of place, and it was an urban way of life rather than Romanness that was desirable.

THE URBAN PRODUCTION OF ROMAN CITIZENS

Throughout this book we wish not only to describe the development of cities under Roman rule, but also to emphasise their role in the production of Roman citizens. The language used in discussing the creation and development of cities was a distinctly Roman phenomenon. At this point, we need to define what we mean by the term 'Roman'. This is quite difficult because the Romans never provided a definition and were themselves aware that the basis for a Roman identity was subject to change. The best understanding of 'Roman' would be as something distinctive from both Greek and barbarian cultures, and exemplified by the use of Latin in official documents, the presence of bathing facilities in cities, the wearing of togas by officials, and the use of a central place in the city, a forum, for public business. These features provided a distinctive set of symbols from which a Roman identity was articulated to a greater or lesser extent according to an individual's choice and the time and place of their existence.⁸ In the language of the city people expressed their identity as citizens of the city, or *municipes*, and even in a colony we find colonists of that place rather than Romans, and an identity primarily based on a legal definition of citizenship. In the cities of the provinces, it was legally only those people who had been municipal magistrates or their descendants who were Roman citizens. It was only after contributing to the maintenance of the city through holding civic office that a person could become a Roman citizen; the rate in most cities was about four persons *per annum*. At first sight this seems a small rate of change, but cumulatively, over a large number of cities in a province and over a period of a generation, the process would have produced an elite group of Roman citizens. So the Roman city, which was apparently in itself a desirable cultural form for those who adopted it, also produced a Roman

⁸ See Revell (2009).

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elite across the provinces of the Roman West, most of which had in some way contributed to the maintenance and/or development of urbanism. It was these men who were also involved in the collection of taxes at the local level and who interacted directly with the representatives of the Roman state – governors, procurators and their entourages. In every case these interactions occurred between people who shared the same legal status of Roman citizenship, but whose social and political status was quite unequal. The impetus for the creation of Roman citizens within the cities seems to have come from Rome, with its ideal of government by means of cities which through their town charters would produce ex-magistrates who were Roman citizens. While the provincials may have regarded a city as an advantageous material form, the Romans saw it as a means to govern an empire and to create a local elite of Roman citizens, who would collect the taxes. Hence, within the *mentalité* of both governor and procurators on the one hand and the provincials on the other, urbanism was a material and geographical development that was viewed as desirable. These desires integrated the Roman city with an imperial project to dominate territory and to extract taxes from that territory in order to maintain an army and feed the population of the city of Rome. For the Roman Empire to reproduce itself over time, it needed to produce and maintain a network of central places or cities from which it might extract taxes and within which social and economic surpluses could be utilised for the expression of an urban way of life.

At the heart of this book lies an understanding of Roman culture based on the reproduction of that culture in an urban context over time and space from the middle of the third century BC through to the early to mid-third century AD (a conception drawn from the work of Henri Lefebvre). Roman culture for the most part reproduced itself in an urban context, whilst at the same time the city formed part of the reproduction of society over time and was the institution that gave a unity to the Roman Empire. Interestingly, in Europe the spread of the Roman-style city did not extend beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire and was not spontaneously adopted by barbarians inhabiting the ancient territories equivalent to modern Scotland, Denmark, Poland and much of Germany. Roman society produced cities, and was at the same time produced in cities, by which the countryside could be said to have been urbanised/Romanised to a lesser or greater degree according to the strength of its connection to the city. The symbiotic relationship between a people and the physical space termed a city or *polis* has been thoroughly interrogated by others and we can safely conclude that both the physical space, into which a person was born, and

their own actions, or agency, will shape the form and identity of a place.⁹ Within the period covered by this book we can identify urban environments in a state of becoming different and taking on new physical characteristics, whether at the point of foundation or through the development of new urban forms. These manifestations represented some of the stimulating effects of the urban habitat in the Roman West. They lay at the heart of what we may see as a culture of cities unevenly distributed across the Roman West.

Running in parallel with the concept of the urban reproduction of Roman society is a recognition that the city, however that concept may have been defined, was an object or social formation that recently conquered provincials could find attractive. New towns might then develop in areas where the population may have created nucleated settlements, but had not had experience of, or seen cause to reproduce, the aesthetics of Roman urbanism. The latter can be seen most clearly in the adoption of architectural types: fora, grids of streets, temples, theatres, and amphitheatres (Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10). These features of urbanism were not adopted uniformly, and variation in the adoption of the architecture of Roman urbanism in time and space provides us with a means to understand variation in the city phenomenon within the Empire in the West. What we find across Italy and the western provinces is unevenness in the distribution of monuments; which is in itself interesting, and points to a considerable degree of variation in the shape of the urban landscape, when we attempt to compare regions or even make comparisons between cities within the same region. This variation on a common theme of urban form should be regarded as an aspect of the cultural reproduction of cities in the Roman Empire, by which any one city might make itself remarkable through the development of additional monuments. These not only contributed to an urban way of life, but also developed a greater sense of Romanness as well. The uneven pattern of urban development across the Western Empire should not surprise us. Programmed into the Roman city was a sense of difference. This sometimes asserted itself in the view that a monument was needed because another city had one, or at other times in the view that a monument found in a neighbouring city or a city in Italy was simply undesirable. In part, the development of urban form in any one city reflected the relation of that city with elite networks of patronage that could release economic resources for expenditure in that particular city.

⁹ Giddens (1984).

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ROMAN CITY

We shall frequently draw attention to the sustainability of the city over time and consider the fragility of Roman urbanism. Some cities today are well known for having become settlements of intense poverty and community conflict, whereas others can be seen as centres for social, economic and political development. In observing the cities of the Roman Empire through archaeological remains, we are able to chart the manifestation of sustainability in terms of the rather unequal distribution of, and expenditure on, economic resources on public monuments. Yet in many (but not all) cities of the Roman West an urban population developed alongside the monuments of the elite; and we have to admit that people were attracted to the city as a place within which new opportunities could be found that were not available previously, or within the countryside. Sustainability, for the Roman city, depended on an elite with the finance to build and to maintain the physical fabric of monumental space, and a non-elite population that believed that living in proximity to the monuments of the elite improved their lives (or was at least not deleterious to them). What is perhaps remarkable about the cities of the Roman West is that in many cases (but not all) there were the resources and will to sustain urbanism over periods of between 100 and 300 or more years. One factor that may have been key to sustainability, often overlooked as a given within the Roman city, was the management of elite conflict by the development of a series of rules or a town charter that, intentionally or unintentionally, created a dynamic of elite competition while managing to prevent that competition from developing a dynamic of violence. Of course, a city could cease to be sustainable, if there was no longer an elite willing to take part in the competitive development of the city's urban fabric and monuments over time, or one which walked away from the idea of maintaining the city in the longer term (concepts that are developed fully in the final chapter of the book).

The sustainability of cities has an economic aspect, as does the building of public architecture, and not surprisingly this question has proved of great interest to ancient historians and archaeologists. Moses Finley did more than any scholar in the late twentieth century to shape the parameters of the debate. He reintroduced into ancient history the model of the consumer city: in which the ancient city, unlike the medieval city, did not produce wealth itself but instead consumed the wealth of the countryside.¹⁰

¹⁰ Finley (1973) and (1977).

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What underpins the model are the notions that surplus wealth was concentrated in the cities of the Empire and that these were the places where a surplus was disposed of; in contrast Finley conceived of the medieval city as a place of production for export. Rather crudely, Finley could state that the ancient world did not produce the architecture of guild buildings found in the medieval world. However, recent re-examination of both the role and types of medieval guilds and the collective activities of Roman *collegia* (guilds or clubs) suggests that these urban institutions had rather more in common than Finley had suggested.¹¹ Moreover, the distinction between ancient and medieval cities in terms of productivity has been questioned by Wim Jongman, who has demonstrated with reference to wool production in Italy that the network of cities may have been just as productive as the urban networks of the medieval period.¹² Part of the problem with the consumer city model is that it views the city and its hinterland in isolation, whereas in reality the city exists in a much wider system of economic relationships.¹³ These are difficult to define, but we need to recognise that the construction or sustainability of a Roman city may have depended on economic factors at a global rather than a local level. For example, Pliny the Younger owned estates in several parts of Italy, but the key source of the substantial sums of money (which he donated to fund the construction and maintenance of buildings in his hometown of Como) was inheritances from friends, associates and relatives.¹⁴ These indicate an alternative means for concentrating surplus wealth at a single location, which did not involve the city's rural hinterland in any way.

The realisation that the city and its hinterland are in some ways a distraction in the writing of economic history (in its widest Braudelian sense) led Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell to regard the emphasis on writing a history of cities in antiquity as irrelevant.¹⁵ What these authors have suggested is that the city existed as a stable location or address through which resources flowed and it was the connectivity between cities that was the determining factor in development. For example, Claudius' conquest of Britain was accompanied by elite finance which produced loans to the new provincials so that they might realise their aspirations for new forms of cultural consumption. Famously the loans were recalled in AD 60 and were a factor in triggering the revolt of Boudicca.¹⁶ There is more to

¹¹ Epstein (1991), pp. 10–40; Black (1992); Susan Reynolds (*pers. comm.*).

¹² Jongman (2000). ¹³ Whittaker (1995), p. 22.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Duncan-Jones (1990), pp. 174–84 on the costs of building cities, to be read with Duncan-Jones (1982) on costs and finances of senators.

¹⁵ Horden and Purcell (2000). ¹⁶ See Laurence (2001b) for a discussion.

this, though. Cities were stable and continued to exist in antiquity because they were known places, which were fixed by geography and recognised as political entities (even if like a ‘rotten borough’ in early nineteenth-century England they lacked a population). However, their sustainability depended on a flow of resources through them, and their ability to extract those resources for the maintenance of urbanism and their public buildings. If a city was disconnected from the global flow of resources, it was likely to fail or shrink to a level of urbanism that could be sustained solely by the economic surplus derived from its immediate rural hinterland.¹⁷ What needs to be recognised in this process is that the city was very effective in extracting a surplus from the flow of resources and, in so doing, created a concentration of resources (in terms of population, economic wealth, cultural capital, and so on), that underpinned a distinctive material form within which a particular ‘way of life’ was pursued that was markedly different from that found in the countryside.¹⁸ Only once the city is established as a stable nucleation does this distinctive ‘way of life’ emerge, with the population engaging in politics, economics, religion, etc. with a greater intensity from that found at locations in the surrounding countryside.

A DISTINCTLY ROMAN CITY

This book is more concerned with the construction of the public city and its relationship to the city’s inhabitants than with these matters. We nevertheless recognise that behind the construction of the architecture and spaces of the cities of the Roman West lie men, women and children. Some are named in inscriptions providing us with an indication of their lives that is far from objective.¹⁹ These epigraphic indicators of the agency behind the construction of individual monuments will be referred to, but we need to accept at the outset that we do not know much, or even in some cases anything at all, about the persons who decided that a city should exist, that money should be spent on its maintenance, and that a city would be a form of *habitus* suitable for them and their dependents. Even with the best preservation, if not the fullest publication, a site such as Pompeii fails to elucidate the nature of gender divisions, female identities, the formation of identity in childhood, or answers to simple questions such as: was this

¹⁷ See Patterson (2006b) for a discussion; also Horden and Purcell (2000); Laurence (2001b) and (1999).

¹⁸ Wirth (1938). ¹⁹ See Revell (2009) for further discussion.

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house inhabited by a man and his dependents or a woman and her dependents? Their identities are formulated in the tombs outside the city with their inscriptions and images that were reminders of their achievements in life to be remembered by the community after their deaths.²⁰ We also need to be quite clear that most cities in the Roman West (apart from Rome, Ostia and Carthage) had relatively small populations ranging from a few thousand up to 25,000. By the standards of the modern world, these settlements were extremely small, representing populations of a similar range to those found in a small college and a large university (from Lampeter [University of Wales] to the University of Birmingham). Cohesive social relations within these population centres would have been maintained through informal and formal face-to-face contacts between acquaintances and ritualised formal contact with strangers, and where necessary were formalised by a set of rules or a town charter.

This book sets out to map the changes in a distinctly Roman, as opposed to Greek, urbanism that developed in the late third century BC at Rome and drew on Greek and Italian traditions of the city to produce new ideas of the city (chapters 1 to 4). Following this Introduction is a series of chapters which are concerned either with the mechanisms of foundation, and therefore with the actions of the elite, or with types of public monuments. We are also concerned, however, with the cultural production of citizens in urban space and the ways in which the public monuments and the activities associated with them create a *habitus* of Romanness that for some at least was complemented by Roman citizenship. We recognise that there is a corollary in private space: in housing, artisan activity and the use of material culture, but that is a different story of Roman urbanism that would require a volume of its own. The relationship of the urban forms under discussion to changes in the urban fabric of the city of Rome is discussed, but in a way that looks to Rome as a reference point or location of new ideas about what a city should look like or what monuments it should contain. Since it would take another volume to do justice to all the developments within the city of Rome, what we highlight are the important new developments within the capital that were of relevance to the shaping of the city in the rest of Italy and the provinces. Just as we cannot find space to examine Rome, we have also omitted the very distinct forms of urbanism found in Ostia and Portus – places that were fundamentally linked to the capital city and whose development was so entwined with that of the capital that their story is quite different from that of the cities under discussion in

²⁰ See also Mouritsen (2006).