

The Idea of the City in Late Antiquity

The city was one of the central and defining features of the world of the Greek and Roman Mediterranean. Challenging the idea that the ancient city ‘declined and fell’, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill argues that memories of the past enabled cities to adapt and remain relevant in the changing post-Roman world. In the new kingdoms in Italy, France, and Spain, cities remained a key part of the structure of control, while to contemporary authors, such as Cassiodorus in Ostrogothic Italy, Gregory of Tours in Merovingian Gaul, and Isidore in Visigothic Spain, they remained as crucial as in antiquity. The archaeological evidence of new cities founded in this period, from Constantinople to Reccopolis in Spain, also shows the deep influence of past models. This timely and exhilarating book reveals the adaptability of cities and the endurance of the Greek and Roman world.

ANDREW WALLACE-HADRILL is Emeritus Director of Research and Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Classics at the University of Cambridge and Emeritus Fellow of Sidney Sussex College. He is a Roman cultural historian and his books include *Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (1983), *Augustan Rome* (1993), *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (1994), *Rome’s Cultural Revolution* (2008), and *Herculaneum: Past and Future* (2011). Former Director of the British School at Rome, he has directed archaeological projects at Pompeii and Herculaneum. This book is the result of his project on the Impact of the Ancient City, which received funding from the European Research Council.

Praise for *The Idea of the City in Late Antiquity*

With exciting literary arguments that challenge the assumption of urban ‘decline and fall’ in the post-Roman West, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill illuminates the continuous bustle of activity in centres like Seville, Marseille, and Ravenna. No seventh-century collapse here, but a lively, highly readable story of proud city dwellers adapting to a new medieval world, in what is also an admirable and compelling homage to his father.

Judith Herrin, Emerita Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Studies, King's College London, and author of Ravenna: Capital of Empire, Crucible of Europe (2021)

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill's book, *The Idea of the City in Late Antiquity*, is a welcome addition to our understanding of the resilience of urban life in the face of the collapse of Roman imperial power in the West. The ‘idea of the city’ is explored primarily through the words of the men who lived into post-Roman times, and mostly in the West. Tracing changes to what it meant to live in a city, even as its physical fabric changed or decayed, opens up new avenues to appreciate the human construction of social, economic, and religious life in the post-Roman world. Wallace-Hadrill demonstrates that the human dimension – not just the physical remnant – is paramount for anyone interested in urbanism, whether ancient or modern. Scholars as well as students will benefit from reading this finely nuanced study of how late Romans used the idea of the city to restore and recreate new and enduring communities.

Michele R. Salzman, Distinguished Professor of History, University of California, Riverside, author of The Falls of Rome: Crises, Resilience, and Resurgence in Late Antiquity (2021)

The Idea of the City in Late Antiquity

A Study in Resilience

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To the memory of my father

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Preface

The landscape of the Greek and Roman classical world was characterised by a dense network of cities – cities, by all means, which, compared to those of the modern world, seem surprisingly small. Cities too which, while contrasted with the countryside around them, also embraced it, in communities which combined city and country. To these Greeks and Romans it seemed self-evident that without cities there could be no form of human society, at least beyond the barbarian ‘other’. This book explores the question of how such an idea of the city survived the partial collapse of unified imperial control in the fifth century AD.

It is often argued, or assumed, that the Greek and Roman version of ‘the city’ did not survive the system’s collapse in the western Mediterranean. The case was made most explicitly by my former colleague and friend Wolf Liebeschuetz in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (2001): he pointed not only to material decline, but to the collapse of the political structures which for him defined the ancient city. In challenging his narrative, I do not argue that his picture is wrong so much as partial. Indeed, many of the physical and institutional structures of earlier antiquity may have crumbled, but, alongside the indicators of collapse, there was survival, reconstruction, reinvention, adaptation – in a word, resilience. The phenomenon of the city is too complex to be reduced to a tick-box list of key features. The idea of the city proved tenacious and persistent, as powerful a legacy as the Latin language or Roman law. In this book, I set myself the task of re-examining some of the writers between the fifth and seventh centuries who had most to say about cities and charting the resilience of an idea.

What made this book possible was the exceptional opportunity of a European Research Council Advanced Grant to pursue the theme of ‘The Impact of the Ancient City’.¹ The project set itself the ambitious – if not over-ambitious – goal of exploring that impact across the Mediterranean from antiquity to the present. We wanted a balance between work on the Latin-speaking Western Mediterranean and the Greek-speaking East;

¹ Formal acknowledgement is due to the ERC Advanced Grant no. 693418, ‘The Impact of the Ancient City’.

between those whose skill was working with authors and texts – that is to say, on the ‘idea of the city’ – and those working on physical realities, archaeological in character; and between those working on antiquity or the early medieval period and those working on more modern material. The group set itself the goal of meeting once a week, to hear papers by a member of the group or a visitor. The result was that we all became used to learning about and discussing material far beyond our own core competences. Hence, in this book a classical historian, who has rarely ventured as far as, yet alone beyond, the fourth century AD, focuses on a period of Late Antiquity that stretches from the fourth to the seventh centuries, and in some cases beyond. If this foray beyond familiar territory at times seemed rash, I was given courage by the support of a remarkable research team, whose periods range from the early Middle Ages to the modern period. But, more to the point, rash or not, it was a duty. The entire spirit of our project was that we were not allowed to shelter behind the cosy barriers of disciplinary specialisation. Of course, that carries risks: those truly at home with the period and the authors I discuss will recognise the hand of the newcomer, and even at times that of the over-enthusiastic convert.

I have tried to compensate for the limitations of my own knowledge by leaning on the friendship of those more expert than myself. My first debt is to my colleagues in the project. Javier Martínez Jiménez, an archaeologist specialising in Visigothic Spain, and Sam Ottewill-Soulsby, an early medieval historian of ideas, both encouraged me in the reading of authors like Isidore of Seville; accompanied me to several Spanish cities, especially Mérida and Reccopolis; and made many useful suggestions on my drafts. To Javier Martínez Jiménez I am specifically indebted for a series of maps, and to Sam Ottewill-Soulsby for advice on much else, including *laudes urbium*. Suna Çağaptay, an archaeologist working on the transition from Byzantine to Ottoman, sparked my interest in Constantinople and Antioch by leading fieldwork trips. Louise Blanke, an archaeologist working with Alan Walmsley on Jarash in the post-antique period, helped me explore the potential of resilience theory. Ed Zychowicz-Coghill, a medieval Arabist, showed me in Spain and Turkey how interconnected were the Islamic and Christian worlds; a thousand pities that the political situation prevented us from visiting ‘Anjar together. Sofia Greaves, a Classicist who chose to study nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy, taught me not only about the impact of classical models on modern urban planning but also about the impact of urban planners on the modern image of the ancient city. Tom Langley, who joined our group while working on his doctorate on the Cappadocian fathers, showed me the rich potential of patristic writing for

often contradictory views of the city. Among my colleagues, I owe an especial debt to Elizabeth Key Fowden, whose knowledge of the Eastern Mediterranean stretches from the Late Antique period to the Early Modern. From the outset, she helped me formulate the project, and insisted on questioning many assumptions, particularly that we can meaningfully talk about ‘the ancient city’ (whose antiquity?). She alone among my colleagues read the whole book in draft, making numerous incisive comments. In particular, she made me think about the western Mediterranean emphasis of this book. Naturally, this is partly the result of the divisions of labour within the project, with my focus on the West balanced by hers on the East. But it is also the result of the different trajectories of West and East in Late Antiquity, with the fragmentation of power into separate kingdoms in the West contrasting with the continuity of imperial power in Constantinople: one result is that the exercise of looking back to the past for models is rather different in West and East. I should emphasise that this book is far from offering a report on the findings of the project as a whole, but represents my own personal contribution to it.

In addition to an exceptional team, I have been fortunate in the willingness of friends to guide me in areas they know far better than I do. My colleague Robin Osborne persuaded me to recast the first chapter. Arjan Zuiderhoek added helpful comments on the same chapter. Mark Vessey steered me through St Augustine and Salvian of Marseille. Andrea Giardina’s research group at the Scuola Normale di Pisa, whose edition of the *Variae* puts our understanding of Cassiodorus on a new basis, and among them especially Fabrizio Oppedisano, Pierfrancesco Porena, and Ignazio Tantillo, invited me for stimulating discussions. Geoffrey Greatrex put his unrivalled knowledge of Procopius at my disposal. Federico Marazzi brought me up to speed on sixth- and seventh-century Italy. Ian Wood, whose friendship goes back to our time as doctoral students, when he was supervised by my father, helped me generously with Gregory of Tours. To two friends in particular I owe an especial debt, for reading and commenting on the first draft in its entirety: Bryan Ward-Perkins and Rosamond McKitterick. At a late stage, Caroline Goodson helpfully surveyed the final draft. Between them, these friends rescued me from a thousand errors, great and small, made helpful suggestions, and pointed to gaps in my bibliography. It is thanks to them all that my footnotes give an appearance of learning that belies the limits of my own knowledge. Their suggestions have made this a better book. Had I followed them all, it would have been even better, but I might have ceased to recognise my writing as my own.

A further process of redrafting followed the comments of the readers for Cambridge University Press. They persuaded me both to spell out my argument more explicitly and to cut back some of the less pertinent discussion. Some may still feel I have expanded too much in my discussions of authors. But here I remain obstinate in maintaining we should not simply mine authors for relevant arguments, but try to understand their ideas on cities in their broader context. I have experienced much frustration in reading the literature on this theme at the way that texts are reduced to bare references in footnotes, as if they were simply a quarry for ‘facts’ or a repertory of opinions. Doubtless, had I been briefer about each of these authors, I would have left space for the many others whom I have decided not to pursue. My aim is not to be exhaustive, but to think about the chosen authors in greater depth. My hope is that among my readers will be those who, like myself, had little previous knowledge of these texts: I wish to share with them my enjoyment.

It may come as a surprise to those who know my previous work on Roman cities that I devote so much space to authors and texts, and so little to archaeological evidence. I have not changed my view that texts and archaeology are most fruitfully read together. However, my focus here is not on the materiality of the city, but on how it was constructed in what contemporaries had to say about it. The archaeology of the Late Antique city has become a vast and fruitful field, but it is beyond the scope of this book to contribute to it. I have tried to compensate for my neglect in Chapter 9, which, rather than looking to the physical remains for evidence of the crumbling of the classical city, and the transformations of the medieval, looks at new cities founded in the period as evidence for the idea of the city which they incorporate.

My last and deepest debt is closer to home. I have moved into territory, especially towards the end of the story, on which my own father was a master, though I could no longer consult him as I would have liked, a feeling which came on me most strongly when I reached Gregory of Tours. When he died, only too prematurely, nearly forty years ago, he left me his books on Late Antiquity. For decades they have looked reprovingly from my shelves, at my neglect of a period I had told him I wanted to work on. It has therefore been a solace and a joy to work through his copies of a series of authors – Orosius, Augustine, Salvian, Cassiodorus, Procopius, Gregory of Tours, and Isidore in particular – who felt like house guests I had too long neglected and could finally meet and get to know. When I first, as a sixth-former, became excited by Roman history, my father suggested I read Gibbon; this I did over a summer vacation, the same in

which I first visited Rome. It set me on a path with many twists and turns, but which at last finds me in the world of Gibbon. To my father’s inspiration I owe more than I can express. He was always suspicious of the work of Classicists working on the post-classical period and would have found much to question here. Nevertheless, it is to his memory I dedicate this book.