

ANCIENT URBANISM AND ITS IMPACT

FOWDEN (E.K.), ÇAĞAPTAY (S.), ZYCHOWICZ-COGHILL (E.), BLANKE (L.) (edd.) *Cities as Palimpsests? Responses to Antiquity in Eastern Mediterranean Urbanism*. (Impact of the Ancient City 1.) Pp. xx + 410, b/w & colour ills, b/w & colour maps. Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2022. Cased, £50. ISBN: 978-1-78925-768-7.

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This volume addresses the impact that Graeco-Roman urbanism had in the post-classical development of eastern Mediterranean cities, focusing on responses and adaptations to the classical past and on the perception of the city from late antiquity to the contemporary world. This book is the first volume resulting from the ERC-project ‘Impact of the Ancient City’, based at the University of Cambridge, which aims to investigate the urban fabric in order to understand, on the one hand, the survival and adaptation of the physical city beyond the Graeco-Roman period and, on the other, the conceptual city preserved in the impressions and utopian prospects of medieval and early modern writings.

In the introductory chapter the four editors set the stage by explaining their provocative approach to the urban stratification of cities using the metaphor of a textual palimpsest, i.e. a writing medium on which a succession of texts has been erased and rewritten. Following this model, each author questions whether the configuration of the city might be an ideal transposition of a palimpsest in which a sequence of architectural traces related to different periods can be seen. The papers consider furthermore how the visible, hidden or only evoked built evidence has taken on different uses and meanings over time, depending on the producing actors or the historical moments in which they were created, helping to shape the identity of the urban space.

A common thread of the eighteen chapters, written by historians and archaeologists, is the definition of the decoders that allow scholars to discern the different layers of a city. By proposing an alternative approach to the common academic interpretation, which tends to separate the different urban phases of a city so as to attribute them to certain historical periods, the intention of the authors is to dwell on the meaning of the urban planning choices made over time. The papers aim to grasp the precise intentions and choices to demolish, repair or reuse certain structures, giving life to an urban fabric that can best respond to the needs of a given society at a precise historical moment. This innovative and convincing approach in reading urban stratification enables a definition of the processes of exclusion, cancellation and selection useful in understanding the transformation of the ancient city. The authors reflect in an alternative way on the search for an ‘original’ model of the city, that is, the Graeco-Roman one often privileged by academic research and also loaded with identity values. Instead, urban changes are considered as positive signs of the evolution of the city and are not separated into layers; the point of reflection is their intersection to identify the phenomena of adaptation, duration and resilience.

The chapters, grouped into four thematic sections, deal with individual case studies, developing an analysis that reveals how cities have been subject to sequential manipulations and interpretations. The first topic, ‘Accumulation and Juxtaposition’, shows the modalities adopted by ancient populations, in comparison with modern ones, in reading and interpreting accumulations and stratifications in urban systems. G. Avni emphasises the phases of continuity that occurred at crucial moments of the urban history of Jerusalem marked by

war events that led to replacements in built landscapes due to transition in rule, accumulation of populations and changes of religion. Avni refutes previous interpretations of radical and destructive changes to deliver a more organic evolution of the city. R. Ousterhout focuses on the significance of the restorations made on three significant monuments of Constantinople during the late Byzantine period. The stratifications of contrasting styles are intentional and purposed with the task of involving the spectator and showing the regenerative eternity of the city. A similar heterogeneous and intentional juxtaposition of construction techniques stands at the core of Çağaptay's study focusing on the Sungur Ağa Mosque in Niğde promoted by the ruler Sungur Bey. The joint use of Armenian, Seljuk, Crusader and Latin styles underlines the continuity with the material forms of the past and is configured as a premise for the future legacy of the sovereign. S. Redford also presents the reuse of ancient *spolia* in the decoration of the minaret of the Sahip Ata Mosque. In this case the incorporation of precise symbols of the past dedicated to old and new beliefs intends to form new cosmological realities. B.J. Walker highlights how the Jordanian site of Tall Hīsbān experienced a long phase of abandonment after the Abbasid period until it was re-inhabited in the Mamluk period and became the capital of the region in the fourteenth century. Walker focuses in particular on the construction, settlement and the Mamluks' investment mentality.

The second group of chapters focuses on the theme of 'Erasure and Selective Memory'. The authors reflect in particular on when, why and how monumental evidence corresponding to certain chronological phases has been (deliberately) overlooked in modern interpretations. B. Anderson discusses the medieval interpretation of the column of Theodosius in Constantinople, especially the understanding that the reliefs supposedly predicted the defeat of the city. The medieval exegesis of the column's iconography was not directed so much to the city's past as to the contemporary and future reality of Constantinople. S. Ottewill-Soulsby analyses how the historian William of Tyre described the cities of the Crusader Levant, deliberately highlighting the urban elements of Graeco-Roman tradition. He argues that the medieval historian made a programmatic selection in his description, excluding those monuments attributable to Islamic domination with the aim of bringing these eastern cities' pasts closer to contemporary western urban landscapes and thus justify the Latin Kingdom of the Levant. By examining a selection of visual representations of the city of Athens during the Ottoman era, Fowden addresses the cancellation and redesign of the city's urban memory to respond to the evolution of visual tastes. Through portraits of the city Fowden grasps how the painters included in their depictions European cultural tendencies, in order to remove contemporary details, preferring a classic and idealised vision of the ancient city, whereas only representations made by local Greek painters go beyond this rigid codification. N. Bakirtzis shifts our attention to the urban image of Thessaloniki, reflecting on the city walls and on the Byzantine Basilica of Saint Demetrios. Focusing on a turbulent and traumatic period experienced by the city from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Bakirtzis takes into consideration the urban planning decisions made following fires and earthquakes that led to safeguarding Byzantine buildings, while depriving them of their ancient urban context.

The third section deals with the antithetical theme of the urban coexistence of 'The New and the Old' with the authors questioning their role, function and symbolic value. P. Magdalino considers these aspects reviewing the urban history of ancient Byzantium. In his opinion the city was originally not configured as a palimpsest, but rather as a new imperial metropolis rising above the Greek city whose urban space was able to accommodate the monuments united by a long processional street. I. Jacobs explores the contrasting urban strategies employed in the sixth century for the rebuilding of three cities in Asia Minor. While the model followed in Aphrodisias and Sagalassos envisaged the continuation of Graeco-Roman urbanism, in the city of Assos the erection of new

structures obliterated buildings, streets and public spaces of the Hellenistic-Roman era. H. Saradi, analysing Byzantine written sources from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, outlines the theme of urban imagination, its idealisation and links with ancient Greek heritage – aspects charged with an identity value within the political situation of that time. D.J. Kastritsis focuses on the urban policy instituted by the first Ottoman rulers in Anatolian and Balkan cities before the fall of Constantinople. He analyses the methods employed by the new governors to insert themselves actively in urban planning within pre-existing contexts by combining the reuse of buildings with original solutions. G. Akyürek addresses the importance that Constantine's porphyry column had in the late Ottoman period for planning the road of Divanyolu Avenue. Akyürek discusses how the column belonging to a previously layered and regular urban fabric was instrumentalised within the changing cityscape, designed to highlight the city's symbolic monuments.

In the last section 'Whose Past' the authors deal with the criteria that led to choices concerning which of a city's many heritages should be preserved. Zychowicz-Coghill analyses the origin of the ancient cities of Syria as reflected in the writings of the geographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī. Zychowicz-Coghill uncovers how the geographical narrative of the Syrian territories, their borders and the urban planning of these cities were traced back to an imaginative pre-Islamic past and to the distribution of different tribal ethnic groups in the region. The ruins of Graeco-Roman monuments are deprived of their historical value and loaded with execrable symbolic meanings. Blanke deals with archaeological research in Jerash, a city with a rich late antique stratification, which has stimulated emphasis of the city's Roman past for political and diplomatic purposes. A.K. Bennison focuses on the selective description of the city of Constantinople in 'Alī al-Tamgrūī's travelogue. Bennison explains that this intentional narrative choice privileges the evidence of the city's Byzantine and Islamic heritage while omitting the contemporary sixteenth-century Ottoman influences in order to meet the expectations of readers who, like the writer, were natives of the Maghreb. A. Seif's chapter is devoted to the interpretation of Beirut's layered past. Analysing the monuments of cultural heritage within the urban fabric, Seif discusses how some religious and civil buildings have been the object of appropriations for political, religious and economic purposes in the construction of the post-civil war identity of the city.

The volume is richly illustrated, allowing readers to comprehend visually the topics covered. Yet a larger selection of colour images would have made it easier to understand some details. Typos are almost completely absent. The volume may be applauded for its quality and for the richness of the multidisciplinary contributions that overcome the conceptual divisions linked to urban stratification and inaugurate a new approach to the study of the post-classical city. Taking into consideration changes in the environment and adaptations of the classical city in later epochs, the authors have been able to identify the selective choices of urban pasts and to trace the evolutions and identities of this selection of eastern Mediterranean cities.

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