

Javier Andreu Pintado and Aitor Blanco-Pérez (eds.), *Signs of weakness and crisis in the Western cities of the Roman Empire (c. II–III AD)*, Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 68 (Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019). pp. 232 € 46.00 ISBN 978-3-515-12406-5.

The publication of the book *Signs of weakness and crisis in the Western Cities of the Roman Empire (c. II–III AD)* is a well-timed English volume treating the crisis of the classical city in the second century and later. With respect to the Iberian Peninsula, this subject had long been neglected, often due to the lack of sources and attention. However, in the last decade we see a rise in publications.<sup>1</sup> The Spanish predecessor of the volume under review ought to be mentioned: Javier Andreu Pintado (ed.) *Oppida Labentia: Transformaciones, cambios y alteración en las ciudades hispanas entre el siglo II y la tradoantigüedad* (Fundación Uncastillo, 2017). The volume under review is not a translation of its predecessor but treats the same subject in a different way with almost no overlap in authors. *Signs of weakness and crisis in the Western Cities of the Roman Empire* is divided into two sections: General Issues and Case studies, with the final chapter set apart as conclusions. Furthermore, it contains sixteen chapters of which thirteen are in English and three are in Castilian. As such, it is a good Anglophone introduction into urban studies of the late Empire on the Iberian Peninsula.

The General Issues section starts out with a chapter by Nicholas Purcell, aptly called “Some questions about Roman Urbanism”. It is a thought-provoking start of the volume, providing us with the questions we could, or maybe should, keep in mind when reading the subsequent chapters hoping to find all the answers. Following the array of questions is the first and profound attempt by one of the editors, Javier Andreu Pintado, to answer some of these questions. As to be expected, the editor has a vast knowledge of the municipalisation of the Hispaniae and he argues that the blanket grant of *Ius Latii* by the Flavians led to the demise of many of these communities. The grant of *Ius Latii* the local elite needed to participate in the urban munificence, unable to keep up with larger and wealthier communities the newly promoted communities, initiated their own demise.

As it were in tandem, the second editor, Aitor Blanco-Pérez, continues where we left off. The newly promoted communities tried to keep up with their monumentalisation but failed. To obtain funds, they sent pleas to the emperor. Interestingly Blanco-Pérez warns us not believe the images of decaying cities portrayed in these pleas. He argues that the local elite engaged in a diplomatic

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<sup>1</sup> Bowes & Kulikowsky, *Hispania in Late Antiquity: current perspectives* (Brill, 2005), Pilar Diarte Blasco, *La configuración urbana de la Hispania tardoantigua*, (Archaeopress, 2012), Laurent Brassous & A. Quevedo (eds.) *Urbanisme civique en temps de crise: Les espaces publics d’Hispanie et de l’Occident romain entre le IIe et le IVe siècle*, (Casa de Velázquez, 2015), Diarte-Blasco (2019) *Late Antique and Early Medieval Hispania: Landscapes without Strategy?* (Oxbow, 2019).

speech in which they were expected to exaggerate the dire situation of the community, in order to draw attention among the many other requests sent to the emperor.

Lourdes Martínez de Morentin uses a single inscription, with only the letters LXXIII, to begin a discussion of *vectigalia* and the right of *superficies*. The argument is clear and beneficial for our understanding of the income for the new *municipia*. Even though the interpretation of the inscription remains unsolved, the proposed interpretation as the indication of a taxed area in the *forum* is a possibility to be kept in mind.

Javier Martínez provides us with an interesting modern view on the investment in public architecture. His article contrasts the construction of aqueducts as part of munificence to the construction of theatres. He argues that some of the munificence in antiquity can be compared with the post 1977 construction of airports in Spain. Even though the urban monuments are not needed, communities and elite built them to compete in the ‘global’ scheme. One of the major problems of the construction of urban monuments, he argues, is the needed upkeep. In periods of economic crisis some of the monuments are left unattended and start to decay.

The last chapter in this section, by David Espinosa, continues on the role of the elite in the rise and demise of the *municipia* of the Hispaniae. He argues that the first generation was eager to show their *amor civicus* by munificence. However, since the Roman citizenship granted to those who undertook *munera* was extended to the whole family, it did not take long for the entire local elite to obtain citizenship. As a result, the benefits of taking on *munera* were lost and the eagerness to participate in the *amor civicus* diminished.

Following these six chapters on general issues of the *municipia*, especially the Flavian Latin *municipia*, the case studies provide us the needed background to advance our understanding of the *oppida labentia*. The volume title refers to the Roman West, and although all of the case studies treat the Iberian Peninsula, nevertheless, the general issues treated do extend to the Roman West more generally.

The first case study, written by the team investigating the mining city of Sisapo (Mar Zarzalejos, Carmen Fernández-Ochoa, Patricia Hevia, Germán Esteban & Rosa Pina) focusses on the reuse and final abandonment of a *domus* to understand the demise of the city itself. Given that the abandonment of the *domus* dates to the late second or early third century, it seems likely that the city saw its demise at the same time.

Alejandro Quevedo shows that the problem of the *oppida labentia* goes beyond the Latin *municipia*. The crisis at the end of the second and early third century also had its effects on the *colonia* Carthago Nova. Although Quevedo adds that the demise of Carthago Nova is an *unicum*, other large cities continue in well into Late Antiquity and even beyond. However, what sets Carthago Nova apart from the others is the

reliance on mining. As the returns from its mines were diminishing, it lost its economic footing. In this light, the Diocletian reform creating a new province with Carthago Nova as its supposed capital is interesting. Quevedo states that there is no archaeological evidence supporting the creation of a new governmental centre in Carthago Nova, and we might have to look for the capital elsewhere.

Pilar Diarte-Blasco recognises two patterns in her case study on the cities of the Ebro-valley. First, she observes that the smaller cities most likely turned into rural territories. In addition, the inland cities were under threat of the 'slow' trade of the later period, whereas they had been able to engage in the larger trading networks of the early empire. As a result, she observes a strong demise of cities in the Ebro valley, which was dotted with small inland cities in the first two centuries of the empire. Her argument supports the unique situation of Carthago Nova, most likely it was too dependent on its silver mines.

Turning to the south of the inland region, the Meseta Sur, Juan Francisco Palencia's observations support the theory proposed by Diarte-Blasco and again provides evidence for an urban problem beyond the Latin *municipia*. Even though five case studies (Libisosa, Ilunum, Sisapo, Consabura and Laminium) contain the whole range of privileged communities, *colonia*, *municipium civium Romanorum* and Latin *municipia*, they are all small inland communities in decline in the late second and early third century.

The case of *Lucentum*, presented by Antonio Guilabert, Manuel H. Olcina and Eva Tendero, is set in comparison to its successful neighbour *Ilici*. Both cities are important ports in the early empire. Nonetheless, *Lucentum* can be considered one of the *oppida labentia*, despite its long history as an urban centre. In this case, we deal with two relatively small coastal cities, and it seems that the *colonia Ilici* benefitted from its tax freedom and could therefore advance its economic position.

One of the most discussed case studies is that of *Segobriga*. However, Rosario Cebrián manages to place the developments of this monumental city in a new perspective. The main engine behind the monumentalization of this settlement are the *lapis specularis* mines. The last feat of the local elite seems to have been the circus, whose construction was started in the second century. Apparently this last monument was too large an undertaking for the elite as its construction occurred at the same time as the diminishing returns from the mines and the new competition from mines in other regions; as a result the circus was never finished. The case of *Segobriga* can be compared with that of Carthago Nova. In both cases, it seems that the economy was dependent on a sole finite economic source.

Cèsar Carreras, Jordi Guardia and Josep Guitart show a more resilient case where the community seems to move to different means of survival. They present the case of *Iulia Lybica* and focus on its *forum* to understand the development of the extremely small city. Based on the low quantity of late antique imported wares and amphorae, they argue that the community was self-sufficient.

Laurent Brassous' chapter treats the changing network of cities. One of his reservations on the idea of decline is that we are treating a shift in the network, leading to the decline of some cities, but the rise of others. One of his points is that the focus on episcopal sees as urban settlements creates the image of a major decline from the 513 *civitates* of the early empire to 71 episcopal sees. However, we have to keep in mind that several urban settlements continued without becoming sees.

In the last case study, André Carneiro treats an underrepresented region of the Roman Empire, the south of Lusitania. The region has few and widely scattered urban centres. Some of these seem successful and continue well into our own time, others have become *oppida labentia* and even *urbes extinctae*. Carneiro's most important perspective is the needed change of view on the classical Augustan *civitas* to a new concept of city that fits the archaeological reality.

The concluding chapter, written by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, turns to the elephant in the room: Christianity and the change of civic ideal. His approach is to understand the view three Christian writers, Augustine, Orosius and Salvian, take on the crisis of Roman urbanism. The chapter especially focusses on the views of Salvian regarding the cities of Gaul. The most relevant change presented in Salvian's work is that he equates Roman citizenship with being Christian. This affected the urban fabric; munificence shifted from the games in the circus to the basilica.

Reading the volume as a whole brings out the discussions and insights obtained by studying the urban patterns of this period. The individual chapters provide the reader with the needed information on the subjects, although some can seem very detailed and their importance to the whole is lost when reading them separately. All in all this volume provides us with some needed insights into the fate of different urban types in the second century and thereafter. The contraction of the Mediterranean trade network left out some of the inland regions where the smaller settlements went into decline. It is an interesting finding that these smaller settlements often are Latin municipia. Their participation in urban munificence strained their resources and led to economic stress before the crisis of the third century. As a result, they went into decline when they were unable to continue the needed upkeep of their monuments or when their economic situation deteriorated even a bit. Nonetheless, some of the settlements did have the needed base and could continue as new centres of the newly found Christian faith. In the end, the early imperial period then must be seen as period of economic boom leading to the growth and urbanisation of pre-existing communities. However, after the resources were depleted or drawn from elsewhere in the empire these newly created urban communities became *oppida labentia*.

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