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URBAN LANDSCAPE SURVEY
IN ITALY AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

An offprint from Urban Landscape Survey in Italy and the Mediterranean

Edited by

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Urban Landscape Surveys: A View from the End

N. Christie

This volume has, to me, revealed an exciting vitality to the study of what might be termed a ‘discarded’ urban past. I say ‘discarded’ in the sense that the majority of the sites explored in this publication and explored by a mass of skilled workers on the ground are ‘lost’ or, in other words, ‘failed’ sites. The label can seem applicable when such sites are visited – often the fragments of buildings are scattered and discarded in their landscape, sometimes near their original setting, but often shifted, and, in other cases, reused in medieval to modern contexts, whether houses, field walls or terracing. But what all these papers do is to relocate these discards, to trace their settings, and to breathe life into these lost towns.

However, a key fact that the various contributors have shown, is that all sites are different, dependent on a variety of factors specific to the locale: natural setting and geomorphological changes; scale of the site and its depth of monumentality and population; post-urban population presences and needs; medieval to modern efforts to rob or reclaim the ground; earlier modern archaeological and other intrusions. Accordingly, some sites are far more visible than others; some are more accessible than others; some have landmarks which guide readings as to what is missing; and some have been more damaged than others. But, most importantly, each site offers great potential and surveys detailed here provide on one level the ‘homework’ for further and more intrusive study and on the other level provide the foundations for framing the management and protection of these crucial sites. These former towns are, after all, to be seen as open-air archaeological laboratories or even perhaps as operating theatres. Using the latter analogy, the land and monuments form the body of the archaeological urban patient, scrutinies are being made of the patient’s condition, and methods are employed to chart the status of this patient, to diagnose needs and to point to ways to probe and gain a better understanding of what can be learnt and

what questions can be asked. What is valuable here is that the various projects can see what has worked, what factors have hindered reading of the hidden features, and can share ideas in ways forward, pooling ideas regarding research questions, both archaeological and historical.

Italy and beyond

By having a strong grouping of Italy-based projects reported and discussed in this volume, arguably this means that we receive a clearer image of how we might frame questions regarding ancient Italian urbanism and archaeologies of urbanism here. Indeed, what is evident from examinations and discussions of the emergent plans and extents of centres such as *Amiternum*, *Aquinum*, *Teanum* and *Suasa* is the variety of urban expression – in terms of their planning, the ordering of public space, monumentalisation, linkage with and exploitation of the natural topography, and relationships with pre-Roman settlement and religious foci. At Teano, for example, while the current geophysical surveys suggest a complex sequence of Roman-period built space, streets and planning, which included and respected the older Italic sanctuary at Loreto, a problem lies in the lack of archaeological access to the Hellenistic-period settlement focus on the acropolis, the seat also of the medieval and modern successor to the Roman town; in this instance, the full picture of the urban form and the roles of its constituent parts necessarily remain incomplete. Did the acropolis retain a role? If so, did the new town plan follow a less artificial course? Does the respecting of the Loreto sanctuary tell us of the character of the urban population, with religion core to its role? Was public space determined by these pre-existing centres (little of the traditional array of public monuments bar a theatre and amphitheatre are evident in the new survey work)? And what happened when the sanctuary declined?

For *Amiternum*, the busy clustering of public structures and the seemingly low level of private spaces or buildings of local well-to-do may denote a centre of administration and religion as opposed to a bustling urban community; the town was a stretched one, with the *via Caecilia* as the spine, but with minimal branches from or parallel to this. Here questions centre on the levels of attraction of the town to local farmers and landowners, with wealth evident at least in the investment in public structures (again the theatre and amphitheatre stand out) and in the necropoleis. But was this a partly absentee elite participation, and might villas in the landscape reflect this? Indeed, it is evident that once the wider landscape context is drawn into discussion – as underway for *Falerii Novi* and its predecessor and successor *Falerii Veteres* (Civita Castellana) – these Roman towns, continuous or lost, come into a different light. This is brought out especially by Simon Keay (2010) in his paper comparing earlier urbanisation processes and contexts in central Italy and southern Spain, in what might be seen as a companion volume – *Changing Landscapes. The Impact of Roman Towns in the Western Mediterranean* (Corsi and Vermeulen 2010), where an emphasis on Romanisation gives strong focus to the interpretations of the emerging archaeology. These towns did not stand in isolation, but drew on existing populations and settlements and their economies; they reacted to local as well as central needs; they performed functions and linked with other centres. At the same time, each urban trajectory differed.

While Italy has been the principal focus to this present publication – in part a reflection of course of where the conference sessions were held but also of where the techniques of urban landscape archaeology are currently being most applied – it is valuable to stress how in Italy these projects are suitably scattered. Unlike field survey or landscape archaeology projects of the last few decades which, arguably, have had a strongly central Italian emphasis (with still some persistence of this trend, notably in the Tiber Valley Project, which has been a major stimulus to urban landscape archaeology – see Patterson 2004), what is clear is that the range of projects active or undertaken has gained a fuller spread in the peninsula and duly reflect where these abandoned or lost sites are located – with the south a particular ‘hotbed’ for these (Arthur 2004; see also Volpe and Turchiano 2005). There are gaps of course – Sicily misses out here as does northwest Italy – but what is anticipated is that these published results and their flags for successful methodologies will generate a wider momentum.

Italy by no means has a monopoly on abandoned and ‘open’ urban sites and this momentum will gather elsewhere. While only one paper in this volume discusses a Portuguese project, the Iberian peninsula is heavy with failed towns which, in a high number of cases, have long seen archaeological – i.e. excavation – scrutiny. What will be invaluable is to see a more systematic employment of

the other techniques identified in this publication to sites like *Tiermes*, *Conimbriga* and others. Most have also seen projects of archive exploration, re-analysis of finds, old reports, museum data, air photographic analysis, etc., but starting to employ other techniques and, especially recording systems, may guide usefully in terms of management of these sites and strategic planning for future excavation and conservation. In fact, *Changing Landscapes* (Corsi and Vermeulen 2010) takes a strongly Iberian slant: alongside reports centred on excavated data (e.g. Reis Martens and Abreu de Carvalho (2010) on Braga, and Correia and De Man (2010) on *Conimbriga*), it is valuable to observe the strongly geoarchaeological approach being pursued at *Ammaia* in central Lusitania province (Vermeulen and Taelman 2010, see also Corsi, this volume), with a notable target to explore the abandoned town’s catchment zone, in order to understand local resources and modes and levels of exploitation (including of resources such as gold and rock crystal); meanwhile, other papers put towns into their rural context by mapping in particular extant traces of centuriation, relationships to roads, and related rural settlement trends (e.g. for Tarragona, by Palet Martínez *et al.* 2010 and Prevosti *et al.* 2010). A benefit that these projects show is that clearly town archaeologies in Spain and Portugal are starting to ‘talk’ far more to rural archaeologies and to stimulate fuller dialogue on connections and communications between urban centres and hinterlands. But it is important to push such dialogue elsewhere and in the Mediterranean context North Africa remains sluggish in this respect, despite a good number of important rural surveys (Leone and Mattingley 2004). City surveys still remain underdeveloped, although a notable exception to this is at the port-town of *Leptiminus*, where a major interdisciplinary project initiated in 1990, and forming the first urban landscape survey for North Africa, has produced significant tie-ins to economic changes in the province and landscape over time (Stone *et al.* 2011).

New work in established venues

It is important to identify also that the methodologies employed and synthesised in this *Urban Landscape Survey* volume do not and should not relate solely to abandoned and buried sites. There are a number of substantial sites in the eastern Mediterranean where preservation of monuments has been strong and these have either long remained visible or been brought properly to light through excavation. Some major urban centres have been the focus of extended archaeological ‘Missions’ by French, German, Austrian, Italian, US and other teams – such as the Italian campaigns at Gortina on Crete, French and Canadian missions at *Xanthos*, and US/New York programmes at *Aphrodisias* – and it is perhaps too easy to rely on the standing remains and work

from these outward, and to argue that much of the site plans is legible already. However, as papers by Groh (on *Ephesus*), Scardozzi (on *Hierapolis*) and Martens *et al.* (on *Sagalassos*) ably demonstrate, landscape archaeological approaches can play crucial roles in expanding known images. This is particularly borne out at *Ephesus*, where, even after a century of excavation by Austrian teams, the city's private and suburban faces still remain poorly understood; however, the 2000–2006 programme of geophysical and surface surveys have filled some of this gap, providing a first mapping of space beyond and even between the public spheres (these very much the long favoured focus of archaeological investigation). Furthermore, the application of specific geophysical techniques in an excavated but built context like *Pompeii* (see the paper by Camardo *et al.*) shows how other routes might be fruitfully employed to enhance knowledge even of the innards of a 'known entity'.

Determining 'ends'

For the majority of cases discussed in this volume, these largely buried and abandoned sites denote urban creations that fell away in the late classical period especially, to be deprived of their populations and their economic or political *raison d'être*. They were discarded – sometimes consciously and strategically – from the wider assemblage of urban centres that continued, that retained their political, religious or economic roles, and that generally exist today in recognition of the validity and success of their foundation and function. Their very loss as towns therefore makes these places of significance. My own focus of research interest is in late Roman to early medieval settlement sequences, core to which is interrogating why some sites failed while others persisted (see also Christie and Augenti forthcoming). In the past, bland statements on the end of Roman rule and the failure of towns reflected a ready expectation of urban and Roman cultural loss; an expectation was also for losses through warfare, through sacks by enemies, or by desertion through inadequate defences in a period of growing and lasting insecurity. The real picture is of course otherwise, since few towns were destroyed in warfare and natural disasters such as earthquakes rarely provoked permanent urban change and decay; however, archaeology does show, for the western provinces especially, early decline of specific Roman attributes, such as baths complexes and theatres, meaning that some centres were at a low ebb when the insecurities of the fifth century especially hit. More pertinent questions are thus: Was urban survival into the early Middle Ages and beyond down as much to military strength – garrison, walls, strategic value to state/kingdom/power – as to a retention of population? Did walls and military strength give greater resilience to a population? Did such attract others from the landscape and from more

exposed sites? Or must we look, in Late Antiquity, to the input of the Church, with bishops providing a human focus to settlement resilience? Did urban decay therefore relate to a weak military status, a failure to retain population, a lost institutional or 'central' role, and a lack of religious 'glue'? Or did wider politico-economic changes prompt decay? As Rome's western provinces fell away and this Empire shrank to its core, as elite roles, moneys and display mechanisms disappeared, and as the wider economy faltered, did the basic institutional framework which had brought many towns into being also break down?

The numerous cases of 'lost' towns explored in this volume provide, accordingly, scope to tackle many of these questions, since these sites, even if venues of periodic robbing, do not have the overburden and intrusions of centuries of continuous use and rebuild. Systematic excavation programmes, building on the mapping work already achieved, could provide hugely important insights into changing urban characters across the later Roman and late antique period, could help to observe material and economic evolutions and devolutions, and could chart when, for example, pagan religious edifices fell out of use, and levels of Christian input began. To a good degree, 'lost' towns such as *Gortina*, *Ephesus* and *Aphrodisias*, with their high quality built survivals, have already seen interrogation on these issues for the East Empire (see, for example, on the theme of Christianisation and Church roles, papers in Farioli Campanati *et al.* 2009), but the trajectories there will differ strongly from those in Italy and the West. The potential of these sites is thus high – but with the warning note that their losses as towns may help less in explaining ends and will chiefly help in charting the modes and rates of decline. Their potential is even higher of course for tackling urban origins, heydays, households, public organisation, design, and basic living. We noted above the Austrian missions at *Ephesus* having already taken a century of work. Each of the sites discussed in this publication could equally merit many decades of detailed sub-surface exploration.

Summary

What stand out to me from the delivered papers and this resultant publication are these aspects: first an elevated awareness of a rich buried heritage in the form of often largely abandoned townscapes; second, the growing range and complexity of techniques which are now being regularly and consistently applied across many areas of the Mediterranean and beyond, and the potential for further techniques to evolve; third, the questions that are being asked before, during and after the application of these techniques and the adaptation of questions and techniques as projects evolve; fourth, the potential mass of data

gathered and the complexity of recording and working with these, with implications for storage, personnel, publication methods and, as importantly, costs – crucial considerations in a climate of straitened economies across Europe (and with high costs implications if more intrusive fieldwork ensues); fifth, the potential for extended and more developed debates on urbanism, landscape evolution, hinterlands, and urban loss; and, finally, there is the issue of heritage and management, since in various of the papers there is reference to recent robbing of sites for materials, the encroachment of modern communities, damage through ploughing or other agricultural works, land ownership issues, and even threats from nature – e.g. erosion, colluviation, etc. These detailed, systematic and highly informative surveys should make landowners, local authorities, regional bodies, museums, etc. more aware and better informed of the value of this buried urban heritage and the need to preserve and study it. Much work has been done, and many valuable results generated; but much more fascinating, challenging and rewarding work awaits.

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