APPENTIX 8

The cities of the Eastern Roman Empire in Late Antiquity General introduction

(Definition, origins, description, fate)

1. Definition of the Late Antique city

The Byzantine city in the period from the 4th to the 6th c. has been provisionally defined as "*a compact, often already fortified settlement, with a high density of buildings… a central administration, economic and cultural (cultic, civilisatory) functions for a surrounding country-side… and for possible sub-centres. (This settlement had) a considerable proportion of non-agricultural functions, and a population engaged in a variety of different functions. It fulfilled a role as intermediary to superior centres (and was) much less an 'Ackerbürger-stadt' than the classic polis…*"[1]. Important prerequisites for acquiring the "πόλεως σχῆμα" (city status) were, according to Prokopios, the area (μέγεθος) of a settlement and the size of its population (πολυανθρωπία) and commercial activity[2]. The active commercial life constitutes a specific distinction between the Late Antique and the Classical *polis*. The latter having a landed gentry resident and competitive was less a place of economic production, than a centre of religion and politics, culture, local administration and display. The architectural setting was also important. A Late Antique city was above all a compilation of important and magnificent monuments, which were a source of pride for its inhabitants. Finally, according to Zeno's law (which does not seem to have been strictly enforced), every city should have its own bishop[3].

2. Origins of the Late Antique cities

Late Antique cities may be divided into two categories[4]: those that succeeded a Roman or Hellenistic foundation (Ephesos, Aphrodisias, Sardis etc.), and those founded *de novo* during Late Antiquity (Justiniana Prima, Sergiopolis, Dara, etc.), none of which developed into a centre of major importance. Constantinople, an old city that was refounded and extensively embellished stands in between. The cities in the first (and largest) category, with their strong architectural legacy, did not experience any radical changes during Late Antiquity, as regards their street layout, system of fortification, burial, or water supply. The most obvious alterations were the erection of churches and the abandonment of the pagan temples (religious shift). Some less noticeable developments connected with civic administration, public entertainment and commerce will be discussed below (cf. 4.4. Public buildings).

3. Textual evidence on Late Antique cities

Our knowledge on Late Antique town planning and urban structures derives mostly from excavations and seems to favour the large urban centres and mainly the capitals of the provinces. Textual descriptions of cities are few and not always amply informative. Among the most fortunate instances are Libanios's orations on Antioch (4th c.)[5], the *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae* (ca. 425)[6], Zacharias of Mytilênê (describing the construction of Dara in 505-7)[7], the mid-6th c. *Life* of St. Symeon the Fool (on the daily life of Emesa in Syria)[8], the

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[1] Koder, Urban (1986), 157.

[2] Bavant, Illyricum (1984), 246, fn. 4.

[3] Jones, *Cities* (1971), 24 and 502-9.

[4] Mango, *Architecture* (1986), 20.

[5] P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C.,* Paris 1955.

[6] *Notitia dignitatum*, (ed.) O. Seeck, Berlin 1876, 227-43.

[7] *The Syriac Chronicle Known as that of Zachariah of Mitylene*, Eng. tr. F. J. Hamilton, E. W. Brooks, London 1899, 164-8.

[8] W. J. Aerts, "Emesa in der *Vita Symeonis Sali* von Leontios von Neapolis", in *From Late Antiquity to Early Byzantium*, Prague 1985, 113-6.

Life of St. John the Almsgiver (on 7th-c. Alexandria)[9], the *Life* of Theodore of Sykeon (on 7th-c. Nicomedia)[10] and the *Miracles of St. Artemios* (on 7th-c. Constantinople)[11].

4. Description of the Late Antique city

4.1. Circuit walls

Walls provided with entrances and towers normally protected all Late Antique cities. Most cities had been fortified at a very early date, some at the time of the barbarian threat in the 3rd c. and others in the 4th c. or later. Apart from land walls, coastal cities could be equipped with sea walls. At Constantinople, these were probably built later than the land walls and at Thessalonica they were of an inferior quality to the land walls[12]. The course of the walls would usually follow the abnormalities of the terrain, resulting to a walled area of irregular shape. The defensive character of the cities became more pronounced after the close of the 6th c., when the walls of several cities in Asia Minor were reduced in circuit, increasing thus, the defence efficiency of their guards.

4.2. Size

The area included within the walls would vary. The following examples (in descending order) offer an idea of the *intra muros* size of some Late Antique cities[13] (cities in capital letters are capitals of provinces). The capital of the Eastern Roman Empire measured ca. 650 ha (5th c.) and was equalled by other important urban centres, like ALEXANDRIA and ANTIOCH. The cities of Laodicea (ca. 220 ha) and Nicaea (ca. 210 ha in the 3rd c.) seem rather large compared to other provincial cities. Dara, one of the most important strongholds on the E frontier, as well as Amorium (Upper and Lower city)[14], were only ca. 75 ha, each.

Most Balkan cities were much smaller[15]: Augusta, Trajana, Odêssos, Nicopolis ad Istrum and SCUPI were 40 ha, each; Ulpiana was slightly smaller (35 ha); Oescus, Bononia, STOBI, Heraclea, SERDICA and Naissus measured ca. 20 ha, each; Horreum Margi was 14 ha, while Roumisiana, with 5.5 ha, was considered a mere "πολίχνιον"[16]. At the same time, Justiniana Prima, which covered a more-or-less similar area (ca. 5.7 ha = the Upper and the Lower city) was definitely considered a "πόλις"[17].

4.3. Urban infrastructure

Within its walls, the layout of the city would present all the normal features of contemporary urbanism, the scale of magnificence depending on the city's administrative status and wealth. The layout of the streets was as regular as the terrain permitted. Often there were two main avenues, bordered with covered colonnades that sheltered shops: the Roman *cardo* and *decumanus,* which met at right angles with a tetrapylon or some other monumental feature at their intersection[18].

The orthogonal street grid, either as legacy of their Hellenistic past or applied during their creation, was the general rule for the layout of the Late Antique city. Thus, at Justiniana Prima, a totally artificial creation of the 6th c. (530), porticoed streets dominate the acropolis, the Upper and the Lower city[19]. Some cities preserve part of their original street plan unchanged even today, e.g. Serdica (mod. Sofia)[20], or Thessalonica, where the Hellenistic street layout can still be detected[21]. It is, however, in the cities of N and central Italy (Fano, Verona, Lucca, Pavia etc.), where the degree of the survival of Roman street grids is most notable, implying a greater degree of urban continuity through the Dark Age[22].

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[9] E. Dawes and N. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints*, Crestwood, N.Y. 1977 (2nd ed.), 195-262.

[10] E. Dawes and N. Baynes, *Three Byzantine Saints*, Crestwood, N.Y. 1977 (2nd ed.), 88-192. Cf. also M. Waelkens, "Pessinonte et le Gallos', *Byzantion* 41 (1971), 349-73 and idem, "Germa, Germokoloneia et Germia" *Byzantion* 49 (1979), 447-64.

[11] S. Crisafulli and J. W. Nesbitt, *The Miracles of St. Artemios: a collection of miracle stories by an anonymous author of seventh-century Byzantum*, Leiden-New York 1997.

[12] It was almost a century after the erection of its first land walls, that Constantinople acquired sea walls (first built in 439). Thessalonica was refortified in the mid-3rd c. in response to barbarian invasions, but the course and form of its fortifications were determined by a later reconstruction which has been broadly dated from 380 to 448-450, the latter date being more preferable.

[13] Measurements cited in Mango, *New Rome* (1980), 62 (unless otherwise stated).

[14] Lightfoot, *Amorium* (1994), 14.

[15] Measurements cited in Bavant, Illyricum (1984), 283, fn. 113.

[16] *Buildings*, IV.i.32.

[17] *Buildings*, IV.i.20.

[18] The cities of Constantinople, Caesarea in Palestine, Zenobia in Syria, Bostra in Arabia and Scythopolis all had tetrapyla.

A system of aqueducts, cisterns (open-air or covered ones) and wells guaranteed the water supply of Late Antique cities, e.g. the aqueduct of Valens (built by Hadrian) and the large open cisterns of Aspar, Aetios and St. Mocios at Constantinople; the two aqueducts at Anemurium, which fed a large cistern that supplied the baths of the city[23]; the aqueduct at Justiniana Prima[24] or the aqueduct at Salamis on Cyprus, whose construction finished under Heraclius[25].

4.4. Public buildings

At the junction of the main thoroughfares or elsewhere was a forum around which public buildings, serving various needs of the city, were grouped. Sometimes (e.g. at Ephesus) there were two fora: one for ceremonial and the other for commercial functions. A Late Antique city with a Classical past would include a number of buildings of reduced relevance (e.g. pagan temples, bouleuteria). Public buildings and places were decorated as lavishly as circumstances permitted, with statues, paintings and fountains.

The municipal administration would usually require a council chamber, a basilica used for judicial and other purposes, an archive's building etc. The demise of city self-government meant that buildings such as bouleuteria were no longer required. The public amenities included theatres, amphitheatres, hippodromes, stadia and baths. Theatres were gradually abandoned as "inappropriate (according to the new religion) means of entertainment". If still maintained, they were usually put into service for different purposes, e.g. the theatre at Thessalonica was used in the 9th c. for public meetings[26]. The amphitheatre was not widely spread in the E provinces and hippodromes were usually found only in larger cities[27]. Bathing remained popular with all strata of society and baths specifically associated with churches and provided for the clergy or the poor of the community were introduced[28].

The cult buildings of the city included the Cathedral, numerous churches constructed to honour various martyrs or simply as a pious gesture, some monasteries (urban monasteries were still quite rare), as well as synagogues. Most churches were newly erected, although in some cases pagan temples, which had escaped demolition and been appropriately freed of evil demons, were transformed into churches. In Athens, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion and the Êphaisteion were turned into churches after the end of the 5th c., at the earliest[29]. The conversion of the 1st c. BC temple of Artemês at Aphrodisias to a church dedicated to St. Michael seems to have taken place around the mid-5th c.[30]. The church also had under its auspices a number of charitable institutions, such as hospices, baths, poorhouses, orphanages etc.

Among the public buildings we should count the ones serving educational purposes, that is schools, libraries and universities. Very few have been identified in excavations so far, but they are attested in sources[31]. From the 4th to the early 6th c., Athens was an academic centre for Neoplatonism visited by students such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzos, Emperor Julian and Libanios. Aphrodisias was a seat of pagan teaching, as were Antioch and Apamea. The 4th c. Pergamon, where Aidesios taught Neoplatonic philosophy, was an important intellectual centre visited by Maximus of Ephesos, Eunapios of Sardis and Julian. Berytus in Phoenicia had an important Law School and Caesarea Maritima in Palestine Prima was a major centre of learning with a library of 30,000 books and a theological school organised by Eusebios.

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[19] The centre of the upper city is a monumental circular forum (diam: 22 m), which marks the intersection point of the two main colonnaded streets; Kondić and Popović, *Caričin Grad* (1977), 307-9, figs. 3-4.

[20] *ODB* 3, 1876 (*s.v.* Serdica, by Robert Browning).

[21] Cormack, Tradition (1981), 106.

[22] Potter, *Iol Caesarea* (1995), 90-8 (citing the relevant bibliography).

[23] Russell, Anemurium (1980), 35.

[24] Kondić and Popović, *Caričin Grad* (1977), 349.

[25] Sodini, Kythera (1998).

[26] Cormack, Tradition (1981), 107.

[27] At Aphrodisias, the stadium was included in the city's fortified area not as part of an urban development scheme, but under military necessities, since to have left the stadium outside the walls would have supplied the enemy with too useful a base of operations [Cormack, Tradition (1981), 106].

[28] On clerical baths, cf. Nielsen, *Thermae* (1993), I, 115-6 and Ward-Perkins, *Italy* (1984), 135-41 (examples from Rome and Ravenna).

[29] Pallas [Metavasê (1989), 38-42] and esp. Castrén [Athens (1999), 218-23], referring to a latest view (p. 220, fn. 35) that dates the conversion of the Parthenôn to a church "not before the second half of the 6th c.". Mango [*New Rome* (1980), 61] dates the conversion of the Athenian temples to churches in the 7th c.

[30] Cormack, Tradition (1981), 110.

The commercial activities of the city were housed in the numerous shops flanking the porticoed streets (where, according to one theory, they gradually approximated the pattern of an Oriental bazaar) or bordering the harbour area. An idea of their layout is provided by the 42 shops and workshops along the S façade of the Synagogue (former Gymnasium) at Sardis[32] and those in the Upper and Lower cities at Justiniana Prima[33]. The latter were two-storeyed; the first floor probably being used as the residence of the craftsman and the ground floor as his shop or workshop.

4.5. Cemeteries

The cemeteries of the city (Christian and Jewish) were situated outside the walls, since it was strictly forbidden to bury the dead *intra muros*[34]. At Sardis the cemetery was situated between the W walls of the city and the Pactolus River and at Justiniana Prima it was ca. 100 m to the S of the city. Outside the walls, apart from the cemetery, one would usually find orchards, villas and monasteries.

4.6. Population

The population of a city often included minorities (Jews, Armenians, etc.) and some cities, such as Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem were cosmopolitan. There is no formula to convert area measurements into population figures, since the latter is heavily dependant on numerous imponderables (amount of space covered by public buildings, streets, squares and gardens, type and size of dwellings, extent of suburbs, etc.)[35]. For what it is worth, certain calculations suggest a population of more than 300,000 in 5th-c. CONSTANTINOPLE[36], about 200,000 for ANTIOCH, at least 100,000 for SARDIS[37] (in the Late Roman Empire), about 50,000 for Laodicea, while Anemurium[38] could hardly have exceeded 4,000 or 5,000. The average population figure for a provincial city is considered between the range of 5,000 to 20,0000.

4.7. Economy

A city normally fed on the agricultural produce of its territory. The denser the network of cities, the smaller their respective territories and the less the final product for consumption or exploitation. Nicaea's prosperity depended much on the control it had over an extensive fertile territory. Egypt was almost unique in the East in having a vast agricultural surplus in grain, which was, however, fully committed (up until the 610's) in provisioning Constantinople and the imperial armies. A city's prosperity was also dependent on its geographical location on main trade routes or on busy ports, on the exploitation of nearby natural resources (quarries, mines, salt-pits etc.) and the organisation of special manufactures.

The *Expositio totius mundi* offers a picture of commercial activity in the ancient world during the 4th c.[39]. Nisibis and Edessa in Mesopotamia were very rich because the Persian trade was channelled through them. The ports of Tyre and Laodicea were particularly prosperous. Ascalon and Gaza in Palestine exported wine to Syria and Egypt. Scythopolis, Laodicea, Byblos, Tyre and Berytus were famous for their textiles. The province of Asia (W Asia Minor) was a producer of wine, oil, rice, purple and spelt, while the districts of the interior contributed little more than textiles and animal skins. The area of the Balkans is portrayed as less prosperous (despite the presence of active ports at Corinth, Demetrias and Thessalian Thebes): Thrace was fertile, Macedonia had iron, embroideries, bacon and cheese, Thessaly produced wheat and Laconia just marble.

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[31] Wilson, *Scholars* (1983), 28-60.

[32] Foss, *Sardis* (1976), 42.

[33] Kondić and Popović, *Caričin Grad* (1977), 325-8.

[34] On the relevant Roman and Byzantine legislation, cf. Dagron, Christianisme (1977), 11-9.

[35] Foss, *Ephesus* (1979), 96-7.

[36] Estimated population figures by Mango [*New Rome* (1980), 62] (unless otherwise stated). Opinions on the maximal population figures of Constantinople have ranged between 250,000 and 1,000,000 (*ODB* 1, 508), but "in the natural order of things Constantinople was incapable of supporting a population of 350,000" [Mango, Constantinople (1976), 119-20].

[37] Russell, Transformations (1976), 139.

[38] Russell, Anemurium (1980), 33.

[39] Mango, *New Rome* (1980), 42.

5. The fate of the Late Antique City

5.1. Decline (?) of the Late Antique City in the East: the problem

A. P. Kazhdan was the first to raise the problem of the eclipse of the city as a vital element in Byzantine society in the 6th and 7th c.. He argued that the polis (in its traditional form) virtually disappeared in the 7th c.. Furthermore, when the cities began to revive in the Byzantine world again, around the middle of the 9th c., they no longer represented a natural and uninterrupted continuum from Late Antiquity, as was previously thought, but had assumed a radically different form[40]. Even more than 50 years later, Kazhdan's thesis remains one of the main issues in Byzantine scholarship. What was (or were) the crucial factors for urban decline? What was its extent? How does it manifest itself? What regional differentiation (if any at all) can be observed?

5.2. The contribution of the archaeological evidence

Much of the progress in developing and understanding this picture of the decline and disappearance of the polis may be ascribed to the contribution of the intensive research made in the fields of historical geography, post-antique and medieval archaeology and numismatics. Byzantine historians must, however, be cautious in handling information on cities provided by archaeology for numerous reasons.

First of all, archaeological results are selective; they are dictated by both the nature of the archaeological method (a slow and exacting process, usually concentrating by force on a relatively limited area of the site[41]) and the limitations of the site under excavation (superimposition of modern towns on ancient cities). Secondly, the complex stratigraphy, so typical for Late Roman and Byzantine levels, is usually misinterpreted and sometimes, where there is some incentive to relate the evidence to some known historical event, there is a real danger of elevating a theory, which began as speculation, to the status of historical fact. Foss, for example, suggested that the Persians invaded Sardis in 616, based largely on the sudden break in the city's coin series for that year[42]. Neither any inscription, nor any explicit written evidence supports, however, a Persian occupation of the city.

Coins are usually misinterpreted as well. They can fix the *terminus post quem* for a given level or locus, only when the level in question is truly sealed, which happens less frequently in Late Roman and Byzantine contexts than is generally appreciated. Even then, the results are frequently disappointing, since only a limited proportion of coins is likely to be legible enough to give a close date or the coin sample is too meagre to produce information of any significance. Coin evidence has also played a major role in formalising the theory of urban decline in the 7th c., especially in Asia Minor. According to this theory the sudden drop in the number of copper coins issued after 660, found in excavations, is evidence of a total breakdown of economic activity that could only be explained by a general abandonment of the sites in question. The Arab wars of the second half of the 7th c. seemed to provide an appropriate background for such a phenomenon. Charanis, however, in the cases of Corinth and Athens, has demonstrated sufficiently the danger of applying such a theory as a general rule[43]. Although both cities display the same lacuna in their coin series as that found elsewhere, there is ample literary evidence (specially in the case of Athens) to show that they continued to exist without interruption, though doubtless in reduced circumstances, during the Dark Age. Hendy has proposed an alternative theory for the sharp drop in the production of copper coinage[44]. He explains it as a deliberate act of economic policy, rather than a consequence of widespread abandonment of the cities in the face of enemy action. He believes it was a direct consequence of the decision to resettle the Byzantine army in Asia Minor after its retreat from Syria, Egypt and the other E provinces, when this part of the Empire fell to the Arabs. This relocation must have created a serious problem for the authorities, since the loss of the E provinces and the abandonment of the Balkans had certainly deprived the state of the high revenue required to pay the army. The crisis could only be resolved by abandoning the system of cash payments to the military in favour of some sort of land distribution. The sharp reduction in the issue of cooper coins would therefore be the expected consequence of a reform that now no longer required the circulation of vast quantities of money to maintain the former system of cash payments. Regardless of which one of the two theories is the correct one, this is a good example illustrating how the same phenomenon can be explained in two completely different ways, influencing our conception of the past, accordingly.

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[40] In his article on "Vizantijskie goroda v VII-IX vv.", *Sovetskaja Archeologija* 21 (1954), 164-88. Cf. also Russell, Transformations (1976), 137.

[41] At Sardis, for example, less than 5% of the city's area had been excavated up to 1968 and the British excavations at Carthage are estimated at a mere 0,02% of that city's surface *intra muros*; Russell, Transformations (1976), 139.

[42] C. Foss, "The Fall of Sardis in 616 and the Value of Evidence", *JÖB* 24 (1975), 11-22.

[43] Charanis, Significance (1955) and id., Sardis (1972-3).

5.3. The symptoms of the 'decline'

For the reconstruction of the general picture of municipal decline throughout the Byzantine Empire, one must rely on the individual details from an ever widening range of sites where excavations are currently in progress or awaiting publication, each forming a small tessera in a larger mosaic. The reports of the excavations will allow the careful reader to plot the whole course of this process of urban 'decay'/transformation, whose standard symptoms have been summarised by J. Russell as follows[45]:

- the closing and partitioning of the porticoes of colonnaded avenues and other public buildings to house a wide variety of domestic, industrial and retail activities
- the permanent encroachment of ramshackle buildings of similar purpose onto streets and other open public areas
- the abandonment of public buildings, especially baths and theatres
- the systematic stripping of their furnishings and, in extreme cases, dismantling and burning of their masonry for lime
- the dumping of rubbish in the abandoned shells of public buildings
- the establishment of new floor levels more suited for new and lowly functions
- the subdivision of spacious private residences to accommodate larger numbers of poorer inhabitants
- desultory maintenance of public amenities such as city-walls, aqueducts, drains and street surfaces, often reflected in makeshift repairs, followed by complete neglect and misuse
- the substitution of wells for aqueducts no longer in working order
- the clogging of principal thoroughfares with debris, including collapsed masonry from adjacent buildings, allowed to remain unclear
- the random burial of the dead within city limits, in places not officially designated as cemeteries.

5.4. The causes of the decline

The decline of the Late Antique cities was due to a synthesis of factors. In general, the period after 500 witnessed a number of calamities[46], like droughts, plagues of locusts (Edessa ca. 500), earthquakes (Cyzicus in 543, Antioch in 526, Berytus, Ptolemais, Tyre and Sidon in 501 and 550) and the worst of all, the bubonic plague of 541-2, which spread to the whole of the Mediterranean world, as far as Spain in the west and Persia in the east. Epidemics of plague or other unspecified diseases are recorded in 555, 558, 561, 573-4, 591, 599 and in the early 7th c., all with catastrophic consequences on the demography of the affected areas. The provisioning system of an ancient city, which depended mostly on the agricultural produce of its territory, was unable to cope with a continuous wave of calamities. If a coastal town could solve a temporary shortfall in supplies, things were more difficult for an inland city, since transport by road was enormously slow and expensive. In most case, when calamity struck an inland town and the accumulated stocks became exhausted, the people had to go hungry.

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[44] Hendy, *Economy*, (1985), 619-62.

[45] Russell, Transformations (1976), 144.

[46] Mango, *New Rome* (1980), 67.

Next to the natural catastrophes and the epidemics, there was also an increase of urban violence. Food, religious and theatre riots, were nothing new but from the time of Anastasios onwards this kind of violence centered more and more on the hippodrome and created great unrest within the cities (pogrom of 507 in Antioch, Nika riot in Constantinople in 532). The incapability of the state to control the masses is in itself another symptom of urban decay, loss of values and an overly declining society. Finally, other crucial factors in the decline of the city, were the devastating wars and invasions that took place all over the empire during that period. Especially in Asia Minor, the campaigns of the Persians in the second decade of the 7th c. were the main factor for the decline of the cities there, as has been identified by Foss[47].

5.5. "*As you like it*": Urban change or urban decline in Europe. Theses

The phenomenon of the transformation of the Late Antique city did not limit itself to the East, but affected the whole of the Roman Empire and efforts have been made by various scholars to view the phenomenon in its broader scale. H. Pirenne was the first scholar to examine seriously the problem of the disintegration of the urbanised and united social economy of the Roman world[48]. He tried to determine the time, the extent and the cause(s) of the phenomenon (impact of German and Arab invaders, the plague, the climatic change, or the intolerable financial and administrative burdens of the later empire). He suggested that there was a lively Mediterranean commerce in the 5th and 6th c., which collapsed in the 7th c. under the weight of the ancient and wealthy civilisations of Asia, reinvigorated by Islam and the newly emergent force of the Baltic/North Sea/Channel area. Consequently, the Mediterranean (E of Italy) became desolate and the making of medieval Europe was mainly ascribed to Carolingian Gaul (the role of Byzantium is non-existent in Pirenne's thesis).

The debate was taken over by Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse[49], who attempted a synthesis of new archaeological evidence and a reinterpretation that respects but modifies Pirenne's judgement. They concluded that, Roman trade, urban and rural settlements and the population levels collapsed in the W not in the 7th but in the 5th c., at least in part under the impact of barbarian invasions. In the E, this change took place in the late 6th and early 7th c., thanks largely to the wars of Justinian. According to Hodges and Whitehouse, this collapse manifested itself in a series of symptoms. The countryside included new self-contained settlements, their population and production in severe decline; the cities were vanishing, or at best were reduced to ecclesiastical and administrative nuclei; the commercial markets were dying and any - if at all - limited movement of goods was directed by "complex chiefdoms or incipient states". Recovery in the W came suddenly, when the early Carolingians linked hands with the Abbasid Chaliphate, through the Baltic, and started importing the silver they needed to unite and govern their empire[50]. While this thriving commerce and these political developments were taking place in Mesopotamia and N Europe, trade in the Mediterranean was reduced to an almost "prehistoric scale" and the Byzantine Empire was an irrelevancy.

In his study of the towns of N and central Italy, B. Ward-Perkins indirectly challenged the picture of total collapse put forward by Hodges and Whitehouse[51]. He accepted the 3rd c.

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[47] Foss, "Twenty Cities" (1977), 469-86; ibid., "The Persians in Asia Minor and the end of Antiquity", *English Historical Review* 90 (1975), 721-47; ibid., "The Fall of Sardis in 616 and the Value of Evidence", *JÖB* 24 (1975), 11-22; ibid., *Sardis*, 53-77. For a criticism of this view, cf. A.P. Kazhdan's review of Foss's, *Byzantine and Turkish Sardis*, in *Byzantina* 9 (1977), 478-84.

[48] Pirenne expressed his views in two books, entitled *Mohamet et Charlomagne*, published in the late 40's and *Mediaeval cities*, published in the late 30's; cf. Barnish, Pirenne (1989), 385.

[49] Hodges-Whitehouse, Origines (1996), with a most useful introduction by C. Morrisson and J. - P. Sodini.

[50] Barnish [Pirenne (1989), 385-400] rightly observes that such a theory, apart from being chronologically and numismatically dubious, explains neither the character of the society that could demand and use the silver, nor how the silver was paid for.

[51] Ward-Perkins, *Italy* (1984).

decline of patronage and its replacement by the state and the senatorial nobility (at first), by the state and the church (later), and the 6th c. change from a sentimental and aesthetic attitude to public monuments to something more strictly utilitarian; at the same time, however, he argued for *a real continuity in the life of many cities through the dark ages, displayed especially in the survival of their street plans.* This feature need not imply dense settlement, but suggests both a population and a degree of civic pride and social control sufficient to protect the streets from the rubble of ruined buildings and from the encroachment of private houses and gardens. With his study B. Ward-Perkins stressed once more the rich regional variations behind the uniform façade of Roman urbanity and the fact that the appearance of 7th c. "crisis" needs rigorous examination through the study of provincial conditions in a disintegrating empire.

In the last fifteen years modern scholarship has taken the debate even further, by giving a whole new interpretation of the phenomenon of urban change in the early Middle Ages. In some cases phenomena which were traditionally viewed as positive signs of decline are now regarded as a profoundly dynamic adaptation of the cities "to suit their own changing circumstances and cultural traditions"[52]. Kennedy's explanation of the abandonment of the Hippodamian town-plan in certain cities is one illustrative example of such a reinterpretation: "*The development of the Islamic city is often seen as a process of decay, the abandonment of the high Hippodamian ideals of classical antiquity and the descent into urban squalor. On the contrary, the changes in city planning may, in some cases, have been the result of increased urban and commercial vitality, as in early Islamic Damascus and Aleppo for example*" [53].

If one is to accept, as it seems, that some of the Late Antique cities survived the Dark Age, even in reduced scale, then one wonders what was the factor(s) that may have specifically ensured their survival and dictated the ways in which these cities changed. I believe that S.J.B. Barnish is right to assume that the only factor to guarantee certain continuity is the geographical location of a city[54]. Cities that survived were the ones acting as gateways or middlemen, standing on or exploiting the frontiers between distinct geographical, cultural, and political zones, which had some need for contact and exchange. Thus, Mesopotamia, Arabia and the Mediterranean meet in Syria and Palestine. Some N Italian towns, themselves interlocked with excellent fluvial communications, linked the trade and culture of Byzantium to the Lombards or to Transalpine Europe. Finally, Thessalonica was the link between the Byzantine empire and the Slav tribes. By contrast, the cities of North Africa were mediators only for the Moorish tribes. The cities of coastal Asia Minor gave access only to the impoverished hinterland of Anatolia and the N Balkans could not have offered many opportunities to the cities that linked them with the Aegean or the Adriatic.

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[52] Webster-Brown, *Transformation* (1997), 7.

[53] Kennedy, Polis (1985), 17.

[54] Barnish, Pirenne (1989), 394.