Late-Antique Urbanism, also pervades a broader picture of methods and transformation from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages, an important focus of the first volume, Recent Research in Late-Antique Urbanism, which is defined as the period between the late third and early seventh centuries C.E., and eastern Mediterranean sites are emphasized. Notable absences are Athens and Alexandria, both active and dynamic cities in this period. For Asia Minor, scholars present six cities that are the subjects of their current archaeological research.

In their articles, the editor of Recent Research—Luke Lavan—and two of his colleagues—William Bowden and Ariel Lewin—initiate the discussion of how the study of ancient cities can illuminate social and political developments in late antiquity, such as the changing roles of the urban elite in light of the increasing influence of governors and other representatives of the imperial administration. Lavan’s discussion of late antique praetoria, official residences of these representatives, relies on his earlier work on the subject. Expanding on his architectural studies, he introduces literary evidence to support arguments for the function of individual rooms in these residences. All of the identifications he proposes are possible, but the question remains whether rooms in such houses can reliably be assigned specific functions. The purpose of the apsidal hall in late antique buildings, for example, is a frequent topic of discussion among scholars. The wide variety of uses proposed for this type of room—audience hall, dining room, and law court—points to the versatility of the form. Lavan’s assignment, then, of one of the two apsidal halls in the praetorium at Caesarea Maritima to the role of courtroom on the basis of an inscription found in the building that mentions judicial activity, while not unreasonable, seems somewhat arbitrary without additional evidence.

The reorganization of the government in the late third century and the division of the empire into many small provinces resulted in an expansion of the bureaucracy and a much stronger imperial presence in cities. At the same time, throughout the empire, there was a marked decline in public benefaction by members of the urban elite, who had for centuries established their local status through the patronage of public buildings and amenities. Lewin, in his study of urban public building in the fourth century, presents some of the epigraphic evidence for the patronage, and in some cases direct control, of construction programs by governors. The rise of Christianity and the corresponding need for churches also had a profound effect on the urban environment and the nature of public building in this period. Bowden’s discussion of churches in late-fifth- and sixth-century Epirus Vetus, a province in western Greece and Albania, proposes a model for the collection and management of the resources that supported these projects. He argues that church building depended on the ability of the local population to absorb the expense, and that rather than relying on the traditional system of patronage by a small group of wealthy citizens, the church drew smaller sums from a wider swath of the populace. He also proposes that a “church elite” controlled these resources. This distinction merits further discussion, as the ecclesiastical class in this period was drawn largely from the local population, often members of the upper class seeking exemption from their curial duties, that is, administrative and financial obligations to the local
government. Bowden’s argument that a slowdown in church building in the second half of the sixth century indicates a decline in prosperity raises an issue that pervades these two books: how to determine cause and effect when using the evidence of urban development to reconstruct social and political history. In this case, the question is whether a phenomenon like this decrease in church building following an intense period of new construction signifies a decline in the fortune of the population, or if it simply indicates that by then there were enough churches.

The transformative effects of such church-building booms as well as the rise of Christianity are illustrated in Olga Karagiorgou’s excellent discussion of the late-antique development of the Thessalian cities of Thebes and Demetrias. She provides concise descriptions of the archaeological evidence for the urban development of each site and explains how this evidence points to the changing priorities and circumstances of these two cities. Within her larger discussion, she persuasively identifies a bishop’s palace in Thebes, and resolves a disparity between the literary and archaeological evidence for the sixth-century fortification of Demetrias.

As Karagiorgou’s discussion clearly illustrates, fortifications of ancient cities were not simply borders or barriers. They were also important and complex monuments that had an enormous impact on the urban environment. Three of the articles in this collection are devoted to city walls, and together they offer a lively discussion of the reasons for and methods of building them. James Crow presents a sampling of walls from the late Roman empire that includes capitals as well as lesser cities. Trends of the period are summarized in his conclusions, where he also argues that late antique fortifications were not slapdash responses to immediate military threats, but that their design and construction were the products of careful planning and architectural evolution.

Neil Christie addresses the issue of planning versus panic in detail in his study of walls in late Roman Italy, in which he sets individual examples into a wider historical context. He focuses first on the fortifications of Rome, Milan, and Ravenna, and includes annotated timelines for their construction and a parallel summary of military changes in the region that would have affected those cities. Examining the impact of wall building on existing urban and suburban structures, the use of spolia, decoration, and the relationship between intra- and extra-mural territories, he argues for an evolutionary model for the construction of “system[s] of defence” (115). The relevance of Christie’s questions is evident in the following article by Samuel Provost, in which he minutely describes the fortifications of Philippi. He provides evidence for the long and complex history of alterations and additions to the walls, and their relationship to the local topography.

Three of the articles in the volume are focused on individual cities farther east. In his discussion of ports and harbors in ancient Palestine, Sean Kingsley uses historical and geological evidence to examine why monumental artificial ports in ancient Palestine were not refurbished or maintained in late antiquity, despite continued extensive sea trade and their cities’ prosperity. His summaries of the archaeology of the two sites on which he concentrates—Dor and Caesarea—and his discussion of ancient sources for the topic will be useful to those interested in further study.

Grégoire Poccardi’s investigation of the topography of the “island” of Antioch (“l’île d’Antioche”), the northwest portion of the city surrounded by the Orontes River, uses very different sources. The site of Antioch, one of the great cities of the eastern empire, leaves little indication of its former glory. While it is well-documented in literary sources, investigation of its material history has proved to be a difficult undertaking. Poccardi effectively uses the available evidence, including aerial photographs and records from the 1930s and earlier. He presents hypotheses for the location of the imperial palace on the island in late antiquity and the orientation and parceling of land there, and he surveys its fate following the reign of Diocletian. He provides two new plans of the island, and while an improvement on previous ones, they highlight the need for a thorough documentation of the ancient city, which would enrich significantly any discussion of Antioch’s urban development.

Unlike Antioch, the city of Palmyra had lost much of its strategic importance by the beginning of late antiquity, and its inclusion in this volume provides a stark contrast to the dynamic, vital cities described by the other authors. While it adopted many attributes of a Greco-Roman city, Palmyra also held fast to its traditional culture. This combination is illustrated in J.-B. Yon’s discussion of the Palmyrene elite’s history of civic benefaction within the context of local religious and social traditions.

Two studies in the volume focus on sites in Turkey. First, using primarily epigraphic and literary evidence, Frank Trombley presents a multifaceted view of life outside the city in late antiquity, focusing on the relationship between city and country, and on the effects of military transit through rural settlements. As the author points out, the countryside is a neglected subject, but one that has the potential to add substantially to our understanding of how cities interacted with each other and with foreigners, like the Arabs and the Persians, and how major historical shifts affected large portions of the population. The lack of archaeological investigation in rural areas is a handicap in the study of these topics, and Trombley’s article makes clear the benefits that could be gained from such research. Mark Whittow’s presentation of recent research on late antiquity in Asia Minor focuses on Ephesos, Aphrodisias, Hierapolis, and Sardis, and offers a useful analysis of the history of the scholarship of the region. He includes a reasoned assessment of the work of Clive Foss, an influential figure in this field. Whittow’s comparison of the end of late antiquity in Asia Minor with the Black Death in England will stimulate discussion of the different ways that architectural evidence...
can be used to reconstruct social history. Both of these articles complement the studies of individual cities in the Asia Minor volume.

The six cities presented in Asia Minor represent a wide range of ancient urban contexts and types of archaeological sites. The authors are archaeologists working on the sites they discuss, and this familiarity allows each of them to present an overview of the history of a city along with the types of evidence that support it. Especially interesting are the presentations of new ideas and directions of research, some of which are well under way and others that are just beginning. As a group, the articles touch on important themes of the study of urban life in ancient Asia Minor, including Hellenization and Romanization and the extraordinary circumstances of the Pax Romana. The unifying influence of the Roman empire not only allowed these cities to flourish, but resulted in the remarkably similar appearance of urban environments as different as Ephesos, a major cosmopolitan capital, and Aphrodisias, a small town in the middle of nowhere with little strategic or political importance. This volume also addresses many of the themes presented in Recent Research, examining them within the distinct regional context of Asia Minor, where, in many ways, the long view of Greco–Roman urbanism can be most clearly traced.

The debate over whether the evidence from late antique cities—the changing nature of public building projects, patronage, and construction methods, for example—can reasonably be said to point to a period of “decline” or one of “transformation” has had a powerful influence on the study of late antiquity in recent decades, and it is for this reason that any historian would be well served by reading the final discussion in Recent Research. “The Uses and Abuses of the Concept of ‘Decline’ in Later Roman History: Or, Was Gibbon Politically Incorrect?” In his essay, J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz argues that the influence of modern concepts of “political correctness” (he cites the desire not to “judge” anything or to label one society “superior” to another) has been detrimental to the pursuit of an accurate history of the late Roman empire. A spirited and illuminating discussion follows, and touches on many important issues, some specific to the study of urbanism in late antiquity, and others, such as cultural relativism and social biases, important to all historians.

Roman Asia Minor and late antiquity are two areas of study that are of growing interest among scholars, but are still of limited accessibility to undergraduates and non-specialists. These two volumes are welcome additions to the available literature in the field. The overviews in Asia Minor summarize the history of sites often omitted from survey texts and whose publications are largely limited to scholarly journals. The articles on Pergamon and Ephesos will be especially helpful to non-German-speaking students trying to get a handle on the long and complex histories of those important cities. Lavan’s bibliographic essay, which opens Recent Research, will prove useful to students and scholars new to late antique urbanism, or those who wish to explore unfamiliar areas of the field. He provides a convenient overview of topics, a logical breakdown of categories (regional studies, individual sites, and urban topography), and a reasoned assessment of the gaps in the scholarship as well as a fine summary of the basic questions of the field. His appendix, which is a bibliography of basic sources for more than fifty cities, supplies a valuable and timesaving reference for anyone interested in exploring an unfamiliar site.

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