

Introduction: Agency and Material Perspectives on Late Antique Urbanism

Cities provide an important window to societal preferences and priorities. This is especially true in the case of late antique cities. The establishment, maintenance, and, in several cases, expansion of these urban landscapes situated across the Mediterranean and its adjoining regions necessitated considerable social and financial investment. The institutions and infrastructure that made such investment opportunities possible demanded continued attention. Yet as time passed from the third to seventh centuries CE, these institutions and infrastructure changed and, as a result, so too did urban development. This in and of itself is not a unique historical phenomenon. It is to be expected that, as political, social, religious, and economic circumstances change, so too would individuals alter the way in which they organize communal living. What is exceptional, however, is the interest and debate that late antique urbanism has generated for over two and a half centuries.

It is widely acknowledged that macronarratives of the rise and fall of civilizations have long conditioned these debates and influenced

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methodologies. Discourse on the fate of the classical city and the emergence of new urban centers in Late Antiquity has since burgeoned, especially over the past two decades in the fields of classical, late antique, Byzantine, Islamic, and medieval studies.¹ This interest is due in part to robust developments in scholarship following the “spatial turn” and to increased problematization of historical narratives that have cast late antique urban landscapes as impoverished, uncontrolled, and disorganized and regarded their associated institutions as amateurish and ineffective versions of their classical predecessors and their medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic successors.² Yet, as Mark Humphries recently noted in his introduction to *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*, those who have followed Peter Brown’s lead in an attempt to recast Late Antiquity “as an age of dynamic, even positive transformation [. . . that

1. Including, but not limited to: Mark Humphries, “Late Antiquity and World History: Challenging Conventional Narratives and Analyses,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2017): 8–37; Efthymios Rizos, ed., *New Cities in Late Antiquity: Documents and Archaeology*, Bibliothèque de l’antiquité tardive 35 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017); Pilar Diarte-Blasco and Neil Christie, eds., *Interpreting Transformations of People and Landscapes in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Archaeological Approaches and Issues* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2018); Mark Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Sabine Panzram, ed., *The Power of Cities: The Iberian Peninsula from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019); Corisande Fenwick, “The Fate of the Classical Cities of Ifrīqiya in the Early Middle Ages,” in *Africa-Ifrīqiya: Continuity and Change in North Africa from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic Age*, ed. Ralf Bockmann, Anna Leone, and Philipp von Rummel, papers of a conference held in Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano—Terme di Diocleziano, 28 february–2 march 2013 (Wiesbaden: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut and Harrassowitz, 2019), 137–55; Luke Lavan, *Public Space in the Late Antique City*, vol. 1, *Streets, Processions, Fora, Agorai, Macella, Shops*, supplement, *Late Antique Archaeology*, no. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Louise Blanke and Alan G. Walmsley, “Resilient Cities: Renewal after Disaster in Three Late Antique Towns of the East Mediterranean,” in *Resilient Cities: Remembering and Forgetting the Ancient City*, ed. Javier Martínez Jiménez and Sam Ottewill-Soulsby (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2022), 69–107; Arabella Cortese and Giulia Fioratto, eds., *Urban Space between the Roman Age and Late Antiquity: Continuity, Discontinuity, and Changes*, acts of the International Workshop, University of Regensburg, 13–14 February 2020 (Regensburg: Schnell and Steiner, 2022); Elizabeth Key Fowden, Suna Çagaptay, Edward Zychowicz-Coghill, and Louise Blanke, eds., *Cities as Palimpsests? Responses to Antiquity in Eastern Mediterranean Urbanism*, vol. 1, *Impact of the Ancient City* (Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2022).

2. The so-called spatial turn refers to the broad academic interest in spatiality, or rather, the perception of space and individual experience within. Heuristic methodologies introduced by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (e.g., Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l’espace* (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1974)) have reinvigorated urban studies among the disciplines of both ancient history and archaeology. For late antique urbanism specifically, this is most evident in works such as those of Luke Lavan, “The Political Topography of the Late Antique City: Activity Spaces in Practice,” in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. Luke Lavan and William Bowden (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 314–37; Ine Jacobs, *Aesthetic Maintenance of Civic Space: The “Classical” City from the 4th to the 7th c. AD* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013); Carlos Machado, *Urban Space and Aristocratic Power in Late Antique Rome: AD 270–535* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

carries] with it none of the negative connotations customarily associated with phrases such as ‘decadence’, ‘Byzantine’, or ‘*Bas Empire*’” have faced serious challenges reconciling this perspective with the very real evidence for urban decay and abandonment in certain locations leading up to the so-called seventh-century crisis.³ Humphries’s concern may be overstated, but it is nevertheless illustrative of the dichotomies that presently exist in scholarship.

Large-scale and meticulous archaeological investigations, too many to enumerate even in the last ten years, have generated rich, new information and significant scholarly contributions. They also have revealed an increasingly inconsistent and unstable picture of the late antique urban environment.⁴ This broad period spanning over three centuries witnessed the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire along with the abandonment of many ancient cities and the contraction of certain interregional economic markets. However, it also witnessed the expansion of the Eastern Roman Empire under a flourishing new capital, Constantinople, the founding of several cities, and the maturation of monotheistic religions on a global scale. With such disparities attested in both the historical and archaeological records, it is difficult to synthesize the narrative of late antique urbanism without resorting to oversimplification. Although few have been as bold as Wolf Liebeschuetz to proclaim that “deterioration is blatantly obvious in Late Antiquity,” the seemingly binary debate of upheaval and disruption versus dynamic transition has become entrenched and continues to influence research trajectories and classroom curricula.⁵ It would seem as though the more information that is gained on the subject, the further we are from reaching a consensus about how to characterize the late antique city, with

3. Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings*, 4.

4. Lucy Grig, “Cities in the ‘Long’ Late Antiquity, 2000–2012—a Survey Essay,” *Urban History* 40, no. 3 (2013): 554–66; Paul Magdalino, “Sixty Years of Research on the Byzantine City,” in *Städte im lateinischen Westen und im griechischen Osten zwischen Spätantike und Früher Neuzeit: Topographie—Recht—Religion*, ed. Elisabeth Gruber et al. (Wien: Böhlau, 2016), 45–62.

5. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, “Was Gibbon Politically Incorrect? The Use and Abuse of Concepts of ‘Decline’ in Later Roman History,” in *Recent Research in Late-Antique Urbanism*, ed. Luke Lavan, supplement, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, no. 42 (2001), 233–38 at 233; Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2005); Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Although books devised for undergraduate study do not take as strong a stance as Liebeschuetz, many end somewhat arbitrarily with the reign of Constantine, especially those focusing on classical art and archaeology (e.g., Fikret Yegül and Diane Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism: From the Origins to Late Antiquity* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019]; Steven L. Tuck, *A History of Roman Art*, 2nd ed. [Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021]), facilitates a continued bias against late antique studies.

a widening divide between not only what took place but also specifically where, when, how, and why these changes occurred.⁶ This problem is evident from the numerous monographs, edited volumes, and journal articles that have been published in just the previous five years alone with titles that include some combination of the words *change*, *transformation*, *continuity*, and *decline*. The terms have become so familiar that they retain little of their original meanings.

This essay, and the special issue it introduces, offers one potential solution to the present impasse. It starts with the premise that more neutral, if not positive, characterizations of the late antique city to date have not ignored instances of “decline” among late antique urban landscapes. Rather, misgivings concerning the validity of the term constitute an effort to move away from the grand, linear narratives that have perpetuated such value-laden expressions.⁷ Inconsistent patterns within the archaeological record, a lack of consensus even in antiquity as to what constitutes urban development, and the need for closer attention to the lived experience of the late antique city have all been presented as compelling reasons that necessitate a more progressive stance.⁸ Therefore, this volume accepts that the cities of Late

6. As suggested by Gian Pietro Brogiolo and Bryan Ward-Perkins, eds., *The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, The Transformation of the Roman World 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), xiv–xvi; Averil Cameron, “Ideologies and Agendas in Late Antique Studies,” in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. Luke Lavan and William Bowden (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 3–21; Grig, “Cities in the ‘Long’ Late Antiquity”; Hendrick Dey, *The Afterlife of the Roman City: Architecture and Ceremony in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5–9; Magdalino, “Sixty Years of Research”; Humphries, “Late Antiquity and World History,” 15–18; Neil Christie, “Introduction: Changing Data and Changing Interpretations in the Study of Transformations of Late Antique Space and Society,” in *Interpreting Transformations of People and Landscapes in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Archaeological Approaches and Issues*, ed. Pilar Diarte-Blasco and Neil Christie (Oxford: Oxbow, 2018), xi–xvii at xi–xiii; Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings*, 4–9; Cortese and Fioratto, *Urban Space*, 9–11.

7. Humphries, “Late Antiquity and World History”; Kim Bowes, “When Kuznets Went to Rome: Roman Economic Well-Being and the Reframing of Roman History,” *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics* 2, no. 1 (2021): 7–40.

8. A representative list of such calls includes Marlia Mundell Mango, “Building and Architecture,” in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14, *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600*, ed. Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 918–971 at 971; Mark Whitton, “Recent Research on the Late-Antique City in Asia Minor: The Second Half of the 6th C., Revisited,” in Lavan and Bowden, *Recent Research in Late-Antique Urbanism*, 137–53 at 150–51; Lavan, “Political Topography”; Jacobs, *Aesthetic Maintenance of Civic Space*; Christie, “Introduction”; Diarte-Blasco and Christie, *Interpreting Transformations*; Humphries, *Cities and the Meanings*; Cortese and Fioratto, *Urban Space*; Fowden et al., *Cities as Palimpsests*.

Antiquity, like those of preceding centuries, were far from uniform, each following different historical trajectories based on chronology, the region within which they were located, and their topographic circumstances, among other factors.

Yet to challenge the notion that transformation and decline were inevitable outcomes of this period, the human agents who acted as formative or disruptive forces within their material environment and associated sociopolitical institutions must be placed at the center of the discussion. Agency-focused methodologies, such as Luke Lavan's assessment of "activity spaces," have done much to nuance our understanding of the lived urban milieu.⁹ Whereas these postprocessualist interpretative frameworks have increasingly gained favor among historians, only recently have archaeologists specializing in Classical and Late Antiquity begun to integrate this method with detailed analyses of the material record. As such, this introductory essay considers how traditional methodologies in classical archaeology focusing on the representational value of materials have facilitated pejorative interpretations of the late antique city, and it explores the extent to which ontological practices can help overcome this barrier. Looking to recent developments in social anthropology, I examine distributed agency models and Actor-Network Theories as tools that can facilitate moving beyond the *what*, *where*, and *when* of late antique cities to answer *how*, *why*, and *for what purposes* objects were created, utilized, or discarded in these urban environments.¹⁰

From there, the articles that follow unite this postprocessualist discourse with particular attention to new materialist applications to shed light on developments in the urban landscapes of Late Antiquity that otherwise may have been misinterpreted in the historical or archaeological record as indicative of decline. In particular, the authors focus on case studies that examine local, regional, and interregional circumstances of production and consumption. Such endeavors illuminate the perspectives of various individuals, including but not limited to artisans, engineers, project managers, patrons, and even the collective *civitas*, who remain silent in historical sources yet were

9. Lavan, "Political Topography."

10. Astrid Van Oyen, "Actor-Network Theory's Take on Archaeological Types: Becoming, Material Agency and Historical Explanation," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 25, no. 1 (2015): 63–78; Nicholas J. Enfield, "Distribution of Agency," in *Distributed Agency*, ed. Nicholas J. Enfield and Paul Kockelman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9–15; Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts, "What Did Objects Do in the Roman World? Beyond Representation," in *Materialising Roman Histories* (Oxbow Books, 2017): 3–19.

integral in the negotiation of spaces within the late antique urban environment. By giving primacy to the recovery of these individuals' impact from material remains, the authors do not take a neutral stance. Rather, they consider a Late Antiquity that we can begin to analyze on its own terms, approaching action within urban environments as creative and intentional processes driven by individuals as well as communities.

THE MATERIAL "PROBLEM" OF LATE ANTIQUITY

Before I can address the utility of agency-based models in the study of late antique urban environments, it is necessary to review how historians and archaeologists have used the study of material artifacts to affirm polarizing views of decline and transformation. Resting at the forefront as a source of contention is none other than Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), though it is worth bearing in mind the extent to which Johann Joachim Winckelmann's slightly earlier *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (*History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764) has also played a role. Although Winckelmann was mainly concerned with ancient aesthetics, his attention to the political, social, and historical context of Greek and Roman art parallels the efforts of Gibbon and other "antiquarian-philosophers" of the eighteenth century in their deployment of both literary and nonliterary evidence in the study of ancient history and culture.¹¹ Inasmuch as Gibbon's work has impacted scholarship in ancient history, Winckelmann's work has shaped trajectories in archaeology and art history, many of which have been used to substantiate Gibbon's views on the "decadence" and "decay" of Classical Antiquity.¹²

11. Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, no. 3/4 (1950): 285–315 at 304–7, 311–13; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Gibbon's Contribution to Historical Method," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 2, no. 4 (1954): 450–63 at 457; John Matthews, "Gibbon and the Later Roman Empire: Causes and Circumstances," in *Edward Gibbon and Empire*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick and Roland Quinault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12–33 at 30–32; Alex Potts, "Introduction," in *The History of the Art of Antiquity*, by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 1–65 at 20–23; Katherine Harloc, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: Aesthetics and History in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xxi.

12. For the survival of antiquarianism in classical archaeology, see Suzanne Marchand, "From Antiquarian to Archaeologist? Adolf Furtwängler and the Problem of 'Modern' Classical Archaeology," in *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences*, ed. Peter N. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 248–85.

At the heart of the issue is Winckelmann's inception of a system of typologies, derived from what he believed was objective empirical evidence, to rationalize visual and morphological distinctions between the arts of ancient Egypt, Greece, Etruria, and Rome.¹³ This methodological approach, which earned him the moniker "father of archaeology,"¹⁴ was not unlike methods employed by other Enlightenment thinkers in their attempts to devise order among vast bodies of knowledge and to understand how these corpora came into being.¹⁵ Although presented as scientific procedures, these efforts relied on a considerable degree of speculation and assumptions about the known world. For Winckelmann, this involved two crucial positivistic suppositions. The first is that he took as an axiomatic truth that his own aesthetic criteria were similar to those of antiquity.¹⁶ The second is that he held ancient artists (or rather, producers) as consciously and primarily responsible for the production of an object.¹⁷ Because Winckelmann's typological system neither attempted to distinguish etic from emic classifications nor did it account for the entangled agency of producers, buyers, and audiences nor their socioeconomic and technological circumstances, his presentation of a linear evolution of artistic production and regression ultimately served a teleological end.

Winckelmann's claim that Hellenistic and Roman artforms were mere derivatives of the earlier Greek Classical style was not entirely without evidence; he relied on literary sources dating as early as the first century CE, particularly the *Naturalis historia* of Pliny the Elder, who claimed that after 296 BCE the art of bronze sculpture ceased (*cessavit deinde ars*), only to be

13. His categorization of Greek art into Archaic (*der altere Stil*), Early Classical (*der hohe Stil*), Classical (*der schone Stil*), and Hellenistic and Roman (*der Stil der Nachahmer*) styles still perpetuate in Greek and Roman art history, even though there is now a broad consensus that this type of periodization is, at best, Athenocentric in its point of view.

14. Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 14. Winckelmann has also been dubbed the "father of classical archaeology" and "father of art history" (Katherine Harloe, "Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768): Charting the Artistic Development of Nations," *History of the Humanities* 4, no. 2 [2019]: 229–35 at 229).

15. Such as in the development of biological taxonomies and early modern encyclopedias.

16. Potts, "Introduction," 20; Michael Squire, "Conceptualizing the (Visual) 'Arts,'" in *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Penelope Murray, 1st ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), 307–26 at 309.

17. R. R. R. Smith, "The Use of Images: Visual History and Ancient History," in *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T. P. Wiseman (London, 2002): 59–103 at 69–71.

revived forty years later in an inferior form.¹⁸ Pliny's primary concern in this passage is the lack of artistic innovation in Hellenistic and later Roman bronze sculptures, following the completion of the Colossus of Rhodes up to the more recent completion of the Colossus of Nero.¹⁹ However, the ancient author's broader analysis in chapters 34–36 situates art production from the third century BCE to the first century CE along a gradual decline into luxury, decadence, and superfluity beginning with Rome's involvement in the East and extending through his own time.²⁰ It is thus from Pliny that Winckelmann inherited an evolutionary model of art production, progressing from utilitarian to beautiful and regressing from beautiful to decadent and, ultimately, utilitarian. In this model, Winckelmann places such a high value on innovation that the types of materials employed in art production and the manner of their treatment carry with them certain moral implications. Clay and wood, as the first mediums believed to have been used by artisans, he deems the most fundamental but also least sophisticated.²¹ The continued use of these materials in Rome, after procedures for working in stone had fully developed in Greece, alongside the "failure" of Roman artisans to match, let alone surpass, Greek standards was therefore understood as a regression.

Winckelmann's attempt to find a correlation between the degradation of aesthetic expression, the treatment of materials, and the artisans responsible for this demise has had lasting consequences for art historians and archaeologists. It has taken considerable time for the study of Roman art history (and material culture, broadly speaking) to progress beyond such reductionist perspectives and emerge from the shadow of Greek art history, at least for the most part. Late antique material culture, however, has not been so fortunate.

18. Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 34.52, in *Pliny, Natural History, Volume IX: Books 33–35*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 394 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 164. See also for further discussion Smith, "Use of Images," 69; Potts, "Introduction," 22–28; Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention*, 107–8, 177–86.

19. Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 34.41–52 (Rackham, *Pliny*, LCL 394:158–64).

20. Unlike Pliny's apparent concern with the effect of Greek and Roman interactions on art production (for more, see Sorcha Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Pliny the Elder and Man's Unnatural History," *Greece and Rome* 37, no. 1 [1990]: 80–96), Winckelmann's assessment is more Athenocentric, positioning decline instead with the fall of democratic institutions in Athens, beginning with Macedonian rule over the city under Demetrios I Poliorketes (Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave [Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006], 317).

21. Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 112, 114–15, 287–88, 299.

Although the term *Spätantike* (late antique) was first deployed by Alois Riegl in 1901 to champion the style of decorative arts and craft production in the period extending from Constantine to Charlemagne, Riegl's idea of *Kunstwollen* as a singular driving force in art development resulted in the divorce of style from material production.²² Consequently, the separation of late antique art styles from object materiality and craftsmanship has exacerbated the inherent problems of typological classification and obfuscated the intentionality of art producers, patrons, and viewers.

A good example of how these paradigms have negatively affected our view of Late Antiquity can be found in traditional interpretations of *spolia* and reuse, which have been used to characterize the late antique city as a discordant mélange. Raphael and Vasari were among the first to link reuse practices with a perceived stylistic decline in late Roman art (in 1519 and 1568, respectively).²³ However, it is Winckelmann's legacy that is most evident in disputes concerning the intentionality and aesthetics of reuse in late antique architectural design beginning around the mid-twentieth century between Friederich Wilhelm Deichmann and Richard Krautheimer. For Deichmann, the practice of repurposing heterogeneous architectural materials in their original state for new construction projects was due to a lack of available homogeneous building materials.²⁴ Had resources permitted, he argued, patrons and artisans would have selected similar items to construct homogeneous architectural assemblages in accordance with what he understood as established Greco-Roman traditions. Although not explicit, Deichmann's argument is one of economics. Rather than a matter of free choice, the heterogeneity of late antique architecture was a consequence of diminished financial circumstances. For Krautheimer, on the other hand, the visual juxtaposition of reused materials constituted a deliberate stylistic choice that marked a significant departure from the perceived homogeneity of earlier

22. Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1985), 3–11. The term *Kunstwollen* may be translated literally as “artistic volition,” or more intelligibly as “will directing and guiding artistic development.” See also Jaś Elsner, “The Birth of Late Antiquity: Riegl and Strykowski in 1901,” *Art History* 25, no. 3 (2002): 358–79 at 358–63; Smith, “Use of Images,” 71.

23. For discussion of these texts, see Jaś Elsner, “From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics: The Arch of Constantine and the Genesis of Late Antique Forms,” *Publications of the British School at Rome* 68 (2000): 149–84 at 149–52.

24. Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, “Säule und Ordnung in der frühchristlichen Architektur,” *Römische Mitteilungen* 55 (1940): 114–30 at 119–26, 130; Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, *Die Spolien in der spätantiken Architektur* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1975), 91ff.

architecture.²⁵ Krautheimer conceded that “Classical purity” in late antique design could have been achieved through the careful planning of reused materials or the production of new elements. Even so, he argued that this was not the intention of project initiators who rather sought to differentiate themselves from their pagan predecessors by establishing new aesthetic standards in design.²⁶ Krautheimer’s stance, following in the *Geistesgeschichte* tradition, construed late antique reuse practices as indicative of a new worldview situated within the recently state-recognized Christian belief system.²⁷

For all their differences, Deichmann and Krautheimer are alike in that they treat homogeneity and heterogeneity as typologies exclusive to earlier and later antiquity respectively. They thereby situate the materials and design of earlier ancient periods as the apogee of artistic production while relegating late antique production to a subordinate position as an imitator, at best. Although they both attempt to overcome the epistemology of aesthetic “decline,” they do not take into account the extent to which reuse practices were common in earlier periods of antiquity or consider that heterogeneity was widespread in both earlier Roman and late antique construction projects, even those that employed newly produced architectural elements.²⁸ Whether the consequence of uncontrollable economic factors or intentional stylistic

25. Richard Krautheimer, “The Architecture of Sixtus III: A Fifth-Century Renaissance?” in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss, vol. 1 (New York: New York University Press, 1960), 291–302; Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed., reissued with revisions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 11–12.

26. Krautheimer, “Architecture of Sixtus III,” esp. 291–92, 299–302.

27. This view is still evident in interpretations of reuse; see, e.g., Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003); Maria Fabricius Hansen, “The Use of Spolia in Early Christian and Medieval Churches: Possibilities of Interpretation,” in *Perspektiven der Spolienforschung 1: Spolierung und Transposition*, ed. Stefan Altekamp, Carmen Marcks-Jacobs, and Peter Seiler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 85–96.

28. For further analyses of Roman and late antique heterogeneity in architectural design, see Beat Brenk, “Spolien und ihre Wirkung auf die Ästhetik der Varietas: Zum Problem alternierender Kapitelltypen,” in *Antike Spolien in der Architektur des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, ed. Joachim Poeschke and Hugo Brandenburg (Munich: Hirmer, 1996), 49–92; Robert Coates-Stephens, “Attitudes to Spolia in Some Late Antique Texts,” in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. Luke Lavan and William Bowden (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 341–58; Philipp Niewöhner, “Varietas, Spolia, and the End of Antiquity in East and West,” in *Spolia Reincarnated: Afterlives of Objects, Materials, and Spaces in Anatolia from Antiquity to the Ottoman Era*, ed. Ivana Jevtić and Suzan Yalman (Istanbul: Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations [Anamed], 2018): 238–57; Allison Kidd, “The Ionic Capitals from the South Stoa of Aphrodisias’ Urban Park: A Case Study of Urban Design in Late Antiquity,” *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 68 (2018): 209–44.

choice, these explanations evoke a residual historical framework by treating material reuse as indicative of deterioration. Although recent analyses of reuse have shown increased interest in examining the motivations for and implementation of such practices in earlier periods of antiquity, this is by no means a ubiquitous trend, and the study of reuse is still limited primarily to late antique and medieval architectural practices.²⁹ Until the phenomenon is more holistically understood in other periods of antiquity, it will remain difficult to ascertain what function it served, or how and why these practices increased in Late Antiquity, without resorting to interpreting reuse as some form of decay.

Such problems in traditional approaches to late antique material culture present a particular problem for the study of the late antique city, which comprised a physical space but was also a product of particular political, religious, and socioeconomic circumstances. As such, how one chooses to define a city's artifact remains can be linked to the legacies of Gibbon and Winckelmann on both historical and material grounds. It is thus perhaps no coincidence that Wolf Liebeschuetz, in his resounding defense of the decline-and-fall narrative, uses trends in the material record of the ancient city to corroborate what he believed was the degradation of Rome's social, political, and economic institutions.³⁰ Foremost among the types of "indisputable evidence" used in his argument are the decay of monumental centers, the increasing prevalence of timber construction, and the abandonment of urban areas. Although this evidence may be translated as quantifiable archaeological data, the inference that it is also qualifiable as an indication of decline rests on modern, if not inherently, Eurocentric expectations of what types of material evidence constitute urban growth, maturity, and decline. As others have similarly noted, decay and progress often have been presented as normative concepts in late antique studies, even though they are based on comparisons to earlier Greco-Roman or later Western ideals of urban success and discount

29. Simon J. Barker, "Roman Marble Salvaging," in *Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone: Proceedings of the LX Association for the Study of Marbles and Other Stones in Antiquity (ASMOSLA) Conference (Tarragona 2009)* (Tarragona: Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica, 2012), 22–30 at 22. For recent promising developments in reuse studies, see Chloë N. Duckworth and Andrew Wilson, eds., *Recycling and Reuse in the Roman Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Sarah A. Rous, "Upcycling as a New Methodological Approach to Reuse in Greek Architecture," in *New Directions and Paradigms for the Study of Greek Architecture*, ed. Philip Sapirstein and David Scahill (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 215–28.

30. Liebeschuetz, "Was Gibbon Politically Incorrect," 233.

major developments in Sasanid Persia and the early Islamic world.³¹ Ironically, Liebeschuetz makes it clear that he is cognizant of the subjectivity embedded in terms such as growth and decay, especially when tied to social institutions.³² Yet without further consideration of contextual detail or the circumstances that determine his interpretation, archaeological evidence has the potential to serve as a form of confirmation bias.

That the prevalence of timber construction could represent a decaying urban environment in Liebeschuetz's view not only is redolent of Winckelmann but also disregards the omnipresence of wood and other types of perishable materials, or even local vernacular architectural techniques, in earlier Roman contexts. In fact, some of the more impressive engineering feats of imperial Rome and Late Antiquity were made possible only through advances in woodworking techniques.³³ If timber construction was not omnipresent in the city of Rome in earlier imperial periods, then how can one account for the numerous (and often severe) fires that ravaged the city and destroyed many of its illustrious buildings, like the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill or the Pantheon in the Campus Martius? It is probable that such subjectivity is sustained in scholarship due to the lack of preservation of certain materials. Because wood is an ephemeral material that rarely survives, lacunae in the archaeological record can adversely influence interpretations of the urban environment, especially in periods or geographic areas where wood was more prevalent than stone ashlar masonry.

Publications like Liebeschuetz's have strained to correlate changes in materiality with changes in social values. The practice has become part of a self-perpetuating cycle in that the same material evidence has the potential to be used in arguments serving very different ends as indicative of decay or

31. Humphries, "Late Antiquity and World History"; For recent treatment of these developments, see Eberhard Sauer, ed., *Sasanian Persia: Between Rome and the Steppes of Eurasia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Panzram, *Power of Cities*; Corisande Fenwick, *Early Islamic North Africa: A New Perspective* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); Louise Blanke, "(Re)Constructing Jarash: History, Historiography and the Making of the Ancient City," in Fowden et al., *Cities as Palimpsests*, 351–70.

32. Liebeschuetz, "Was Gibbon Politically Incorrect?," 235–37. To this we may also add continued reluctance in classical studies to more broadly engage with world history (Grig, "Cities in the 'Long' Late Antiquity," 563–64; Humphries, "Late Antiquity and World History").

33. Roger Bradley Ulrich, *Roman Woodworking* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Lynne C. Lancaster and Roger Bradley Ulrich, "Materials and Techniques," in *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, ed. Roger Bradley Ulrich and Caroline K. Quenemoen, 1st ed. (Chichester: Blackwell, 2014), 157–92 at 168–70, 180–82, 185–86, 190.

transformation if the evidence is not grounded in contextual contingencies. This tendency is especially evident in cliometric studies, which have devised metanarratives of the “long” Late Antiquity based on overly broad and generalized macroeconomic data. As Kim Bowes has recently pointed out, sweeping generalizations determined by such data at the expense of clearer, albeit hyperlocal, data have played a direct “role in articulating a new set of rise-and-fall histories of the Roman empire.”³⁴ As a result, factors that have negatively skewed our perception of cities, such as traditional clearance archaeology practices, are overlooked and continue to substantiate the appearance of urban decline. Even if one could argue that this practice no longer exists in archaeology, it is important to recognize that even some modern cultural management procedures, such as anastylosis practices, can play a similar role. Anastylosis, which comprises the restitution of dismembered elements from a building, has been an important means of making certain ancient monuments and their recovered urban landscapes intelligible to modern viewers and encouraging cultural tourism. However, generally agreed-upon principles of anastylosis require that surviving building elements be re-erected in their original position within the assemblage.³⁵ In practice, this protocol overwhelmingly favors the re-erection of ashlar and other forms of large stone masonry over other types of construction, such as brick-based masonry, which would be impossible in most cases to re-erect according to established conventions. Whereas large ashlar masonry was the preferred method of construction mostly for large-scale public buildings in Greco-Roman

34. Bowes, “When Kuznets Went to Rome,” 26–27; Andrew I. Wilson, “Approaches to Quantifying Roman Trade,” in *Quantifying the Roman Economy. Methods and Problems*, ed. Alan K. Bowman and Andrew I. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 213–49 at 245–46; Van Oyen and Pitts, “What Did Objects Do,” 4–7, have similarly warned of the potential biases of deriving conclusions from large or uneven datasets that have been gathered and classified according to different regional traditions.

35. The Venice Charter (ICOMOS, “International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964),” 2nd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice, 1964) and its supplement, the Krakow Charter (ICOMOS, “Principles for Conservation and Restoration of Built Heritage (The Krakow Charter 2000),” International Conference on Conservation, Krakow, 2000), outline provisions for anastylosis. However, these charters are relatively short and ambiguous. Publications by Dieter Mertens, “Planning and Executing Anastylosis of Stone Buildings,” in *Conservation on Archaeological Excavations: With Particular Reference to the Mediterranean Area*, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price (Rome: ICCROM, 1995), 113–34, and Friedmund Hueber, “Building Research and Anastylosis,” in *Preparatory Architectural Investigation in the Restoration of Historical Buildings*, ed. Krista De Jonge and Koen Van Balen (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 77–82, problematize the issue and have served as benchmarks for agreed-upon practices.

antiquity, it was not as common for utilitarian, private, or vernacular construction nor for many types of construction in later periods. As such, the practice tends to perpetuate an ahistorical, “perfect” image of ancient Mediterranean cities as being composed entirely of large, gleaming stones.³⁶

The brief examples outlined above demonstrate how certain research methods have conditioned us to focus on instances of decline in the late antique urban landscape, even when they are not representative of archaeological assemblages as a whole. The embeddedness of such approaches in our professional practices makes it critical that, as we move forward, we embrace methods that force us not only to grapple with existing biases but also to overcome them. Agency-based studies are perhaps the most important of these. They have received considerable traction in recent years in part because they have proven to be effective at deconstructing cultural taxonomies by accounting for changes on a local, everyday scale as opposed to a macroscale.³⁷

A particularly cogent example of this approach comes from Simon Loseby’s analysis of the privatization of public spaces in the city of Arles during Late Antiquity. There, he noted alterations in the space surrounding the city’s circus, where the area had been leveled to make way for the addition of small, multiroom dwellings to the circus’s exterior.³⁸ The sheer scale and nature of these works reveal that at least some form of civic organization and authorization was required. The dwellings were consistent in plan and form and were spaced around the circus at regular intervals in an arrangement that permitted continued access to the circus’s interior, which remained in use as a venue for public spectacle into the sixth century CE. The regularity of the pattern, which still emphasized the shared public use of the venue, indicates that these were not examples of wanton encroachment. Instead, they seem to have constituted an effort by the city to provide affordable housing for its urban population.

36. Elizabeth Key Fowden, Suna Çagaptay, Edward Zychowicz-Coghill, and Louise Blanke, “Historical Distance, Physical Presence and the Living Past of Cities,” in Fowden et al., *Cities as Palimpsests*, 3–26 at 11.

37. Marcia-Anne Dobres and Christopher R. Hoffman, “Social Agency and the Dynamics of Prehistoric Technology,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 1, no. 3 (1994): 211–58 at 225–26; Astrid Van Oyen, “Historicising Material Agency: From Relations to Relational Constellations,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 23 (2016): 354–68 at 365.

38. Simon T. Loseby, “Arles in Late Antiquity: Gallula Roma Arelas and Urbs Genesisii,” in *Towns in Transition: Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Neil Christie and Simon T. Loseby (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 45–70 at 52–54.

Similar examples of officially sanctioned transformations of certain public spaces for housing or utilitarian use during Late Antiquity have been evidenced elsewhere, even in diverse urban environments, such as in southern Italy (as discussed in the following article by Ben Russell, Girolamo F. De Simone, Vincenzo Castaldo, and Pier Luigi Morbidoni), Ostia, and Cyrene, as well as in legal codes regulating the use of space in Constantinople.³⁹ This trend is substantiated by emerging, comprehensive analyses of public space across the eastern and western Mediterranean, thus making it clearer that such interventions were undertaken as formalized urban management approaches, in some cases as a means of generating revenue for the city, rather than as a result of civic abandonment.⁴⁰ They represent an active choice among late antique urban communities to embrace new forms of communal living and their approaches to crisis management with innovative solutions.

Scholarship has much to gain from such reevaluations of the material record. As the example from Arles shows, the clarification of these types of urban modifications not only invites but *requires* a reinterpretation of the sub-elite populations who occupied these spaces from the status of parasitic squatters to gainful tenants. Although it might be considered overly “progressive” to presume that the provision of affordable housing was part of a civic effort to address income inequalities or was an altruistic measure, it is nevertheless fruitful to consider it as an option. Doing so invites reconsideration of other types of urban interventions, such as the partitioning of elite housing or the demolition of certain structures, as a means of creative adaptation. Here, the lessening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots in the urban environment could (and perhaps should) be understood as a positive social gain.

The ongoing presence of an urban street, square, or building within the fabric of a city similarly invites reconsideration. As recently posed by Ine Jacobs, how specifically do such instances of continuity reflect a city’s

39. E.g., Codex Theodosianus 15.1.52. For further discussion, see Helen Saradi, “Privatization and Sub-Division of Urban Properties in the Early Byzantine Centuries: Social and Cultural Implications,” *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 35, no. 1/2 (1998): 17–43 esp. 18–20; Catherine Saliou, “Identité culturelle et paysage urbain: Remarques sur les processus de transformation des rues à portiques dans l’Antiquité tardive,” *Syria* 82 (2005): 207–24; Axel Gering, “Ruins, Rubbish Dumps and Encroachment: Resurveying Late Antique Ostia,” in *Field Methods and Post-Excavation Techniques in Late Antique Archaeology*, ed. Luke Lavan and Michael Mulryan, supplement, *Late Antique Archaeology*, no. 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 249–88.

40. Lavan, *Public Space*, 14–21, 141–149, 335–338, 374–375.

devotion to sustaining links with its classical past?⁴¹ And if the function of a street, square, or building remains the same but looks different, is this enough to qualify the urban character as changed? Conversely, could the continued presence of such features be the result of a relatively passive yet pragmatic maintenance of the city's existing infrastructure, in which features were left in place not because they continued to serve the same purpose or function as in previous centuries but rather because wholesale demolition and reconstruction would have been impractical? If so, then it is also possible to reframe reconstruction works following major destructive events, such as earthquakes, as opportunities for communities to rebuild their urban environments in a manner that better reflects their contemporary lived experiences and expectations of the future. However inauspicious the catalyst may be, these newer layers should be analyzed within their immediate historical contexts and not exclusively in comparison to previous centuries.

Ultimately, such questions require us to accept that the material conditions of urban environments in Late Antiquity are inseparable from human action (or inaction) and decision-making. This does not mean that analyses need to be less anthropocentric, but rather, as Lucy Grig puts it, we need a "more humane archaeology" that moves beyond seeing the urban environment as an end in and of itself.⁴²

AGENCY AND THE LATE ANTIQUE CITY

The identification of agency has long been integral to the study of history as a means of understanding causation and other circumstances of cultural development. Agency-based methods, however, drive these lines of inquiry further in that they require practitioners to reflect on multiple types of factors involved and the relations among them. In the study of Late Antiquity, agency-based methods are particularly useful in that they can help clarify diverse patterns of cultural and societal change, especially over long-term scenarios, without relying on abstract statistical data and etic artifact typologies.⁴³ Such approaches have been common in the field of archaeology for some time, especially among archaeologists in Great Britain and

41. Ine Jacobs, "Looking in Two Directions: Urban (Re)Building in Sixth-Century Asia Minor," in Fowden et al., *Cities as Palimpsests*, 247–63.

42. Grig, "Cities in the 'Long' Late Antiquity," 565. This stance is also taken up by Christie, "Introduction," xiii.

43. Dey, *Afterlife of the Roman City*, 15; Fowden et al., "Historical Distance," 7–8.

anthropologists focusing on prehistoric debates. However, archaeologists focusing on Greco-Roman and late antique studies traditionally have concentrated more on narratives derived from texts than from materials, which consequently has led to a reliance on materials primarily for their representational value.⁴⁴

This state of affairs has begun to change only recently as specialists in Classical and Late Antiquity have shown an increasing willingness to engage with innovative, postprocessualist theories, especially following what has been referred to by Astrid Van Oyen as the “relational turn” over the last decade.⁴⁵ Whereas Van Oyen, among others, has broadly addressed the considerable potential of these theories in their application to specific types of production (e.g., ceramics), it is useful to consider the utility of agency-based methods in the study of the late antique city and the city’s relation to broader cultural patterns. For the purposes of this special issue, the discussion here will focus mainly on Actor-Network Theory and Material Engagement Theory, and how the articles that follow approach them.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) involves the investigation of interrelated actors and their networks. As Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold argue, this model acknowledges that people and materials are actors that can (and do) interact with each other, and through such interaction they become actants with the potential to instigate future action.⁴⁶ This does not mean that people or things wield a fixed, intentional agency. Instead, it means that their engagement with one another constitutes agency, which yields new trajectories that can be traced as paths within the network.⁴⁷ In this regard, ANT draws from Material Engagement Theory (MET) as a necessary means of determining agency. To some degree, agency in ANT and MET is like

44. Smith, “Use of Images,” 60, 98–102; Andrew Gardner, “On Theory-Building in Roman Archaeology: The Potential for New Approaches to Materiality and Practice,” in *Materialising Roman Histories*, ed. Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), 203–9 at 203–4.

45. Van Oyen, “Historicising Material Agency,” 354–56. For discussion about the “relational turn” and what it shares with other “turns” (such as the ontological turn and the material turn) see Gardner, “On Theory-Building,” 204, 206–8.

46. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 54–55; Tim Ingold, “When ANT Meets SPIDER: Social Theory for Arthropods,” in *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, ed. Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris (New York: Springer, 2008): 209–15 at 212.

47. Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 148–49; Van Oyen, “Actor-Network Theory’s Take,” 65.

Newton's principle of inertia, which posits that objects will maintain their status quo unless acted upon by another force. Yet in this case, it is humans and materials, rather than Newton's objects, that are subject to the mediational capacity of the other. Unlike Alfred Gell's conceptualization of material agency, which distinguishes primary (intentional and/or conscious) agents from secondary (nonintentional and/or unconscious) agents, ANT and MET accept that materials and the "things" that are made from them do not have conscious agency but also accept that they should not be treated so differently from humans who do.⁴⁸ Rather, materials and the things that are made from them have intrinsic characteristics that condition the decisions and actions of humans who encounter them. The potter or the sculptor, for example, must make decisions in their craft based on the material qualities of the clay or stone medium in which they are working. Both the craftsperson and the medium are transformed, but only at their intersection. Importantly, agency between humans and inanimate objects needs not be "equal" or symmetrical in its distribution across networks, as certain actants may impose greater conditions than others.⁴⁹

For those who engage the material record in their research, ANT and MET require us to acknowledge that material properties are not as static as they are traditionally treated in scholarship. Whereas it is well known that some materials such as clay have variable properties depending on whether the clay is left to dry out, baked, or fired in a kiln, a matter less discussed is that other materials are also quite mutable, such as stone when it is heated, cooled, or exposed to air and weathering. If such properties are not fully taken into account, the modern analyst misses an important point. The potter or the sculptor must anticipate the various trajectories of material reaction depending on the artisan's or commissioner's intended outcomes. And even for the most skilled artisans, successful outputs were not always a given simply because production processes carry certain risks. For the ceramicist, occasional misfiring or improper heating was unavoidable in the high-temperature environment of a kiln. For the sculptor, an internal fault in the stone could render the sculpted object unusable. Especially pertinent for late antique communities is the fact that softer stones, such as limestones and

48. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, 144–49.

49. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 54–55, 63–86; Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, 119–49.

volcanic tuff, are ill-suited for reuse and recycling.⁵⁰ Although they are easier to carve and are often readily available to local communities, they are more prone to weathering and thus can be structurally unstable if not recarved or redeployed appropriately. Vitruvius, writing in the late first century BC, acknowledges these and other material factors throughout his treatise *De architectura*, as does Pliny the Elder in chapters 33–37 of his *Naturalis historia* nearly a century later.⁵¹ Thus even in ancient contexts, craftspeople as well as commissioners understood that human action and material reaction were interdependent.

ANT and MET have much to offer the study of the late antique city, particularly when the voices of certain urban actors, such as craftspeople, laborers, and contractors are preserved only in the material form of the artifact. As a relational ontology, an actor-network approach redirects questions about changes in the urban environment from *who* was involved and *why* certain decisions were made to consider instead *how* such outcomes were achieved, thereby channeling the discussion more usefully to clarifying complex matters of material engagement.⁵² This shift, in turn, reframes investigations from what an object *means* or *signifies* to the more poignant question of what an object *does*. Although it is unlikely that a specific or direct answer can be derived from such questions, the attempt to devise one can still be valuable.

Doing so requires one to consider the many contributing factors that have resulted in the preservation of an artifact or an assemblage in its current form, what is often referred to as an “artifact biography.”⁵³ These considerations can include anything from the circumstances of an artisan’s training and the

50. Peter Rockwell, *The Art of Stoneworking: A Reference Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 17–18.

51. For soft stones and weathering specifically, see Vitruvius, *De architectura* 2.7.1–2, in *Vitruvius, On Architecture, Volume I: Books 1–5*, trans. Frank Granger, Loeb Classical Library 251 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 104–8, and in *Vitruvius, Ten Books on Roman Architecture*, trans. Ingrid T. Rowland, commentary and illustrations by Thomas Noble Howe (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1999), 38–39; Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 36.50, in *Pliny, Natural History, Volume X: Books 36–37*, trans. D. E. Eichholz, Loeb Classical Library 419 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 134. See also Jean-Pierre Adam, *Roman Building Materials and Techniques* (London: Routledge, 2005), 23, 106–8, 157–61.

52. Van Oyen, “Actor-Network Theory’s Take,” 65–73.

53. Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind*, 44, 246–47; Van Oyen, “Actor-Network Theory’s Take,” 66; Annette Haug and Adrian Hielscher, “Materiality as Decor: Aesthetics, Semantics and Function,” in *Materiality in Roman Art and Architecture: Aesthetics, Semantics and Function*, ed. Annette Haug, Adrian Hielscher, and M. Taylor Lauritsen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 3–24 at 3.

resources available to them before, during, or after the production of an item to the methods used by excavators in the recovery of these items and their subsequent classification. Attempts to reconstruct these artifact biographies have the potential to influence interpretations of associated networks and trajectories beyond the immediate circumstances of the artifact. This focus can have considerable implications for decline-and-fall narratives that have persisted through an overreliance on the representational qualities of artifacts and typological classifications. Rather than attributing the loss of an artifact typology to an artisan's inability to maintain standards or to a deterioration of associated civic or social institutions, the process can be more appropriately ascribed to changes in how humans engage materials.⁵⁴

This set of problems and questions does not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, ANT and MET should best be understood as the necessary first step in a series of investigations to better elucidate historical decision-making and the outcomes that follow in late antique urban environments, especially in the absence of literary evidence. This is a crucial point that has been missed by critics, who find such theories to be fundamentally contradictory. Their concern, put simply, is that the emphasis on inanimate agency, or rather the causal properties of materials prior to their intersection with human agents, risks oversimplifying or devaluing the impact of human potential and intentionality.⁵⁵ For archaeologists in particular, the danger here would be that ANT and MET transform the ontology of people into primarily materials rather than human beings and engages only synchronic approaches to agency a priori in a field that is necessarily diachronic in its objective.⁵⁶ These apprehensions are not without justification but are representative of an overly cautious purview. Any study of material culture necessarily starts with material objects as a point of departure. However, investigative strands that follow should be in pursuit of an anthropocentric end. ANT and MET methodologies do not discount this, they simply aim to present potentially productive ways forward by asking different sets of questions about people and their material environment and by posing new hypotheses based on these questions.

54. Van Oyen, "Actor-Network Theory's Take," 70.

55. For a thorough discussion of such concerns, see Niels Johannsen, "Archaeology and the Inanimate Agency Proposition: A Critique and a Suggestion," in *Excavating the Mind: Cross-Sections through Culture, Cognition and Materiality*, ed. Niels Johannsen, Mads Jessen, and Helle J. Jensen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012), 305–47.

56. Johannsen, 329–39.

The articles in this special issue aim to do just that. Contributors consider diverse datasets within the material record to perform much-needed multi-scalar analyses of urban landscapes, the humans living in them, and their connected networks, from larger imperial centers, such as Constantinople and Ravenna, to smaller provincial cities, such as Aeclanum in Campania. Rather than using the material record to establish criteria for the changes that occurred during this period, authors engage with material culture to investigate the ways in which populations embraced similar or altered forms of urban living. Whereas certain transformative phenomena, from the more dramatic events of natural disaster and military conquest to the subtle processes of sociopolitical and religious transmutation, instigated a range of responses, the inevitability of such responses must be questioned. Were these reactions formalized or spontaneous? What levels of risk were individuals willing to take? To what extent were certain members of the urban community resilient to change or transformation, and what decisions did they make, or what resources were available to them to achieve such resilience?

Admittedly, such complex questions cannot be answered in a single special issue. The set of articles that follows explores urban development and artifact manufacture and use, or even disuse, through varied *chaînes opératoires* and other mechanisms of industrial activity. Examinations of the *chaîne opératoire*, which comprise breaking down and studying the potential sequence of steps or actions taken in production, have gained particular traction as a useful application of ANT and MET in analyses of the built environment and the building industry. This is in part due to the sheer scale and complexity of the factors involved in construction. Architecture cannot be reduced to a singular entity, artifact, object, or thing. Instead, it exists as a compound assemblage that reflects and shapes the human actions that take place within and around its space. As such, studying the network of actants involved can prove fruitful for those hoping to move beyond modern expectations or rigid typological classifications and approach the processes of construction, building maintenance, and spatial change with greater flexibility—provided, of course, that the reconstructed *chaînes opératoires* and other mechanisms of industrial activity are similarly understood as flexible and potentially nonlinear.⁵⁷

57. For more on this, see Ben Russell, “Roman Stone Carvers and Their Chaîne Opératoire,” in *The Value of Making Theory and Practice in Ancient Craft Production*, ed. Helle Hochscheid and Ben Russell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021): 71–88.

Authors in this special issue pay particular attention to the built environment as a litmus for the health of an urban landscape, recognizing that many characteristics traditionally understood as normative standards of earlier classical cityscapes, such as monumental construction, are not in and of themselves the sole indication of prosperity.⁵⁸ Instead, their work considers the resources and infrastructure required for the maintenance, development, and expansion of urban spaces as a representative tool for assessing civic investment and engagement. This approach elucidates the choices individuals have made to engage with their material environment—choices preempting or precipitated by economic, religious, or administrative changes, external threats, and/or natural disasters—in an effort to better understand contemporary beliefs, social values, and cultural attitudes.

Articles are arranged according to geographic purview and the type of material reviewed, each highlighting case studies drawn from across the Roman Empire and its former territories.⁵⁹ As such, authors do not present instances of radical change or stasis but rather explore subtle negotiations of public space and its associated institutions. They therefore draw our attention not only to agents of the state, church, or local officials but also to individuals who were active in the urban landscape yet often remain silent in the historical record, such as merchants, project managers, and craftspeople. They further reveal the extent to which these individuals served as driving forces for urban development through their capital, labor, and ideological investment. This is especially evident in the way each author addresses the topic of resource management.

Beginning with the Italic peninsula, Ben Russell, Girolamo F. De Simone, Vincenzo Castaldo, and Pier Luigi Morbidoni examine how communities upheld urban living, even in the face of significant environmental, religious, and administrative change. Communities in southern and central Italy over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries CE had to contend with a Visigothic invasion, Vandal incursions, a catastrophic earthquake, and the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which covered much of the inland areas of the province of Campania and some of northern Apulia et Calabria with ash. Whereas one might expect that cities throughout the region experienced urban decay in the aftermath of these events, such was not the case. Despite the general

58. Fowden et al., *Cities as Palimpsests*. See also Kidd in this volume.

59. Discussion of cities along frontier zones is limited largely because these areas were in flux even before the late antique period and as such are better suited for synchronic rather than diachronic analyses, or a much larger volume.

picture of gradual deurbanization and total abandonment witnessed in cities such as Nola, Calatia, Suessula, and Neapolis, the city of Aeclanum presents a surprising level of urban vitality during this period. By situating the building record of Aeclanum alongside the city's ceramic and epigraphic evidence as case studies that reflect intentional human agency in the urban environment, Russell, De Simone, Castaldo, and Morbidoni demonstrate how the managed decay of select public spaces, sustained industrial production, and protracted trade together permitted certain social, political, and economic activities to continue in the city's center. Although the record is not ubiquitous across the whole of Aeclanum's urban area, with some areas abandoned in favor of the development of others, it presents a surprising counternarrative to the situation in other communities in the region that faced the same difficult circumstances. Importantly, the article's conclusions invite reconsideration of how we should define urban success or urban failure based on the material evidence. By underlining the importance of a pluralistic approach to material output, these case studies reveal that, among some urban communities, circumstances and events long considered to be catastrophic to urban success were transient phenomena against forces of cultural resilience.

Expanding beyond the regional context of southern Italy, the next two articles employ an interregional approach. They examine procurement and production methods within the late antique building industry as part of broader urban phenomena. Focusing on the creation of the new capital cities of Constantinople and Ravenna, Riley Snyder in "Beyond Urban Planning: Challenges of Resource Management in the Construction of Late Antique Capital Cities" addresses material procurement techniques and infrastructure development, both of which were vital to monumental construction projects in these cities. Whereas scholarship has tended to focus on the acquisition and use of spoliated stone materials, Snyder situates the use of brick as equal to and at times greater than that of stone materials in late antique construction products. Brick was in particularly high demand between the fourth and seventh centuries CE. Even in instances in which solid stone masonry was preferred, brick materials were used in lime mortar to add strength, hydraulicity, and longevity, at times exceeding 50% of the mortar's volume and surpassing the demand for structural brick. However, because Constantinople and Ravenna were newly founded capital cities, they lacked the established infrastructure necessary for the rapid, mass production of brick. Snyder provides a detailed analysis of this hypercompetitive environment for limited resources and reveals how such demand could be met. Although certain

archaeological and textual evidence is lacking, Snyder fills in the gaps by using ANT and MET to reimagine how material sourcing and production in Ravenna and Constantinople was undertaken. The human agents involved faced serious logistical challenges, some unique to each city based on their specific social, geographic, and historical circumstances. Even so, it is clear that they overcame these obstacles through highly coordinated and interdependent networks of raw material suppliers, transporters, and producers/craftspeople. Such findings attest to a highly productive building industry, which was capable of adapting to new circumstances and implementing creative and efficient solutions in urban environments, even at a particularly large scale.

Similarly addressing the late antique building industry yet with a wider geographic scope, the final article by Allison Kidd, “When Less Is More: Monumentality and the Architectural Orders from the Tetrarchs to Justinian,” focuses on the production and consumption of newly carved stone architectural elements. With specific attention to the proportional and aesthetic standards of the late antique architectural orders, Kidd explores the unique situation in which smaller architectural elements were preferred in monumental construction projects across the Mediterranean. Surprisingly, this phenomenon occurred regardless of the building’s function, patron, or the workshops involved. Whereas this major shift in scale traditionally has been understood to be indicative of reduced financial possibilities and labor insufficiencies, Kidd uses a distributed agency model to assess the relative impact that stone availability, production and transport logistics, and ideological concerns had on decision-making in the late antique building industry. She argues that the use of smaller architectural elements is nevertheless indicative of continued, broader trends in antiquity that otherwise have been overlooked. Freshly quarried and newly carved architectural elements still met the functional and aesthetic standards established in earlier periods of antiquity. Considering the enormous effort and expense that construction processes entailed, from the planning and procurement of materials across overseas routes to the assemblage and finishing of elements on site, Kidd reveals how the production of these elements *ex novo* reflected the economic capabilities and ideological priorities of urban populations during this period. The individuals involved in the production process responded to changes in the way the market functioned, just as patrons, project managers, and artisans did in other periods of antiquity when political, social, economic, or religious institutions changed and evolved.

Together, the authors illuminate the perspectives of urban agents who increasingly constricted their attention to a particular region or city (with varying degrees of self-reliance) yet still participated in complex, long-distance economic markets and political systems. The overlapping pictures presented in the articles that follow signal greater levels of urban productivity and networks of connectivity at local, regional, and interregional levels than are typically accepted in scholarship. By examining objects as products inextricably linked to the sociopolitical, religious, and economic priorities of late antique urban populations, the contributors renegotiate ideas about how individuals and communities preserved, reconfigured, and/or rejected certain urban models and social values during this transformative period. In doing so, this special issue expresses a more flexible view of late antique urban developments. It repositions “decline” as a form of adaptation and reevaluates definitions of continuity and innovation. It thus brings coherence to debates among diverse fields of research focusing on the late antique period and demonstrates future possibilities for scholarship, especially concerning what new insights on the late antique city may offer to the study of urbanism in other ancient periods. ■