

Urban Landscape Survey in Italy and the Mediterranean

Edited by

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Introduction

Field survey has been making a major contribution to our understanding of the rural landscapes of the Mediterranean for nearly forty years. During that time the techniques used to map ancient settlement patterns have grown in sophistication from being a process of simply identifying sites in the landscape, to one which provided nuanced understandings of their layouts, chronologies and contexts. One consequence of this was the growing realization in the 1980s and 1990s that these same techniques also held out the promise of making a major contribution to our understanding of urban sites, particularly the large towns, cities and ports of the Classical Mediterranean. This was spurred by seminal projects such as the study of Boeotian towns by Bintliff and Snodgrass, as well as by the refinement of geophysical techniques and aerial photography that could be used for the fine-grained analysis required to bring out details of urban layout, and the use of Geographical Information Systems.

The consequence of all these developments has been an upsurge in the non-destructive survey of urban sites, both in Italy and in other parts of the Mediterranean. Archaeologists have been quick to realize the potential offered by this technique. Large and complex urban sites which had hitherto been studied in a piecemeal approach that was largely predicated upon the monument-based interests of earlier scholars were able to use survey techniques to rapidly generate plans of partial, or in some cases, complete townscapes, most notably at such sites as *Falerii Novi*, *Italica*, *Zeugma* and *Aphrodisias*. This has led to a revolution in how archaeologists approach urban sites, with survey techniques being used increasingly often to generate a plan of a town site prior to excavation as a way of ensuring that the excavation can be used to address site-specific questions in a way that had not been possible before. Cultural heritage management authorities have also benefited from this approach, with urban surveys providing them with a very effective tool for gauging the degree of archaeological survival on major urban sites in their care and choosing appropriate conservation strategies. Most recently, research has begun to reveal the advantages of integrating a range of different non-destructive techniques on urban sites, choosing those suites that are most appropriate for the nature of the town in question. In combination with exciting new computer-based means of data visualization, all of this work means that it is now possible to virtually reconstruct a buried town within a relatively short space of time, as opposed to the old and destructive excavation-centered approach that could take generations. Unsurprisingly these advances are

starting to make a very important understanding to urbanism in general and the Roman Empire in particular.

This volume builds upon all these new developments and is indeed one of the first to focus exclusively upon the contribution of survey techniques to our understanding of ancient towns. It arises from two international workshops held in Rome at the British, Belgian and Dutch Schools in 2007 and 2009, whose focus was a methodology led enquiry into the nature of urban settlements primarily in Italy, but also in Greece, Turkey, Croatia, Portugal and Spain. The volume contains some 23 papers from leading specialists in the field, which focus upon two underlying themes. The first deals with the characterization of urban sites and draws upon a wide range of case studies. These range from key protohistoric centres in central and south Italy, to towns that epitomise the contradictions of cultural change under Rome, such as *Paestum*, *Aquinum* and *Sagalassos*, to Roman centers such as Teano, *Suasa* and *Ammaia*. The second theme focuses upon inter-urban relationships, with particular attention to wider urbanized landscapes in Italy.

The volume is not meant to represent the full geographical spread of survey based town research in the Classical world, but aims to present a good selection of recent and on-going projects where excellent integrated survey work significantly moves the limits of our current knowledge about ancient towns, most of which were partly or completely abandoned. Without prejudice to the conclusions reached by the authors of each contribution, or by two specialists who inserted their comments at the end of the volume, the editors would like to stress a few points common to many research projects presented here. One is that many authors propagate quite rightly that a good combination of urban surveys not only significantly enhances the knowledge of the scale, structure and chronology of specific buildings and town sections, but allows now to look at the wider phenomenon of urbanism in a valid and necessary comparative perspective. Furthermore, some contributions emphasise that since (proto-) urbanisation also entails the formation of a dependent countryside, research of rural settlement patterns is also crucial to come to an understanding of this process. This is a plea for wider area approaches and for not limiting the survey zone to just the urban centre. As expected, no any urban study can be considered complete if the town is not framed into its relationship with the whole suburban context and even the wider territory. For many teams ideally, the field surveys should really be part of a holistic approach also encompassing small scale ground-truthing operations,

such as test-pitting and focused excavations. And in fact several projects aimed, from the beginning, at an integrated approach, combining field surveys with aerial archaeology, geophysical prospections and excavation. Some authors also warn that the results of the application of one or other technique, such as traditional field walking, proved even to be misleading, considering the very strong biases of post-depositional processes and in particular of soil disturbance. Certain approaches in city surveys are still in an experimental stage and much research still has to be done on methodological issues, e.g. on sampling

strategies and on the study of the effects of post-deposition. However, instead of surrendering to these problems, some teams take such issues as the point of departure for further investigations and develop their site as a laboratory for experimentation in field survey methodology. This allows for further development of an adequate methodology and warns against drawing far reaching interpretations on urban development on the basis of the results of short-term urban survey projects.

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and Cristina Corsi*