

Mark Humphries: *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2019 (Brill Research Perspectives). VI, 112 p. € 70.00/ \$ 84.00. ISBN: 978-90-04-42260-5.

This book is published in the series Brill Research Perspectives on Ancient History, which is a peer reviewed journal of extended essays, focussing on specific historical debates and critically analysing them. The first major advantage of this book is that it provides an overview of past and more recent debates on the transformation of cities in Late Antiquity. An additional value is in the critical reading of the various approaches, and the study of the late antique city from a historical and an archaeological perspective. Finally, a regional catalogue of all the main publications that have looked at the late antique city is presented. This list is an essential starting point for anyone interested in approaching the late antique city for the first time.

The start of the book discusses the origins of the definition of Late Antiquity, from the work of Peter Brown, and considers various aspects of the concept of the late antique city.

Past approaches are often shaped by the identification between Late Antiquity and the spread of Christianity. This traditional perspective tends to focus on the changes brought about through religion. The author finds this concept to be one of the major problems in the study of Late Antiquity. The book instead sets out to analyse the evidence beyond the purely topographical features shaped by changes in religion, and looks at the cities through the eyes of the societies living in them. For this reason, the book investigates first political and economic life and then religious aspects.

After these thematic analyses, the last part of book critically considers social practices and human interactions. Finally, the debate on the 'decline' and 'fall' of the cities versus their 'transformation' is reconsidered, arguing that this binary approach needs to be put aside. The whole analysis, as pointed out by the author, is carried out by a historian who used archaeological evidence, although this latter does not seem to play a significant role in the discussion. The modern trend of looking at ecological evidence instead of relying almost exclusive on the analysis of architectural features is also mentioned. This is certainly an essential point of view to take into consideration, plagues and earthquakes that characterised Late Antiquity certainly played a significant role in shaping the urban forms, although in this case also the

very complex issue of a shrinking population should be taken into account. However, the data available is still extremely limited, often referable to one site, and the paucity of evidence does not allow a full understanding of trends. An element that could perhaps have been discussed to a greater extent is the limited quality of archaeological evidence, often coming from non-stratigraphic excavations or those that are chronologically difficult to define. Chronologies are often unreliable, and this is perhaps one of the major problems related to the continuous debate of transition versus decay. It is true that there are nowadays a lot of modern methodologies to record and study these cities, but funds for carrying out field work are less and less available.

The book is extremely well written and it is rich with historical sources, which are often used to initiate the analysis. It takes in a very wide perspective, from the centre of the Empire (Rome) to the periphery, with a preference for the east where textual evidence is probably richer.

Of great interest is the debate in section 8, where the author points out the priority given to the concept of Christianisation. The major issue has been that these cities had a long period of occupation and went from being Classical Greek or Roman cities to being late antique ones. He indicates that the major problem here lies in the fact that previous analyses are very often biased by the initial assumption that the Greek and Roman cities were in fact better equipped and organised, from which follows that the transition into the late antique period must have been one of negative impact. He echoes the words of Bryan Ward-Perkins (1997) in his famous article where scholars studying the late antique city were classified either as 'Continuists' or 'Catastrophists', indicating that this latter were normally classicists who saw the transition into Late Antiquity as evidence of "urban decay", and the former were mostly Mediaevalists who were used to see a different approach to urbanism.<sup>1</sup> A similar consideration is made here where it is rightly pointed out that neither the Greeks nor the Romans had a 'monopoly on urbanism' (87) and many other civilisations expressed urbanism in a different manner. The advent of Islam also had an impact on the evolution of these urban forms, in the Levant and North Africa, Spain and also Sicily can certainly be added. The impact saw a substantial interaction between the pre-Islamic and the

1 B. Ward-Perkins: *Continuists, Catastrophists, and the Towns of post-Roman Northern Italy*. In: *PBSR* 65, 1997, 157–176.

Islamic urban forms. This in fact opens up a much wider problem, the fact that the influence of the Islamic tradition in the West has often been overlooked, due to an overarching focus on the Greek and Roman evidence. Actually, the idea of the superiority of the Greek and Roman city has entailed an even stronger bias regarding the study of the early Islamic cities. The approach in fact often had to go beyond the regional perspective, as we see differences also within the same regions. This leads to the essential point, namely that Late Antiquity cannot be addressed globally, because with the disappearance of the western Roman Empire, each city followed a different development, and both the original form of the settlements and their later fate varied. Societies responded and reacted to stimuli differently. Since the cities are primarily and essentially the expression of the societies living in them, the landscape adapted to the needs of the new societies. The point of view of 'decay' versus 'transition' has to be rethought to give room to a more critical analysis of the evidence, which takes into account the historical and natural events which characterised the different periods.

Overall this is essential reading for anyone working on Late Antiquity and the transformation of late antique cities, as it offers a lucid analysis of all the different approaches. It reconsiders the evidence critically and moves away from the traditional approach of attempting at 'modelling the late antique cities', with intelligence and clarity.

---

Anna Leone, Durham University  
Department of Archaeology  
anna.leone@durham.ac.uk

**[www.plekos.de](http://www.plekos.de)**

Empfohlene Zitierweise

Anna Leone: Rezension zu: Mark Humphries: *Cities and the Meanings of Late Antiquity*. Leiden/Boston: Brill 2019 (Brill Research Perspectives). In: Plekos 22, 2020, 377–379 (URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2020/r-humphries.pdf>).

---