

N. Christie, S.T. Loseby (edd.) , *Towns in Transition: Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Pp. xii + 318; illus. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996. ISBN: 1 85928 107 9

For the historian of late antiquity, the city has been a crucial arena for the exploration of the issues of transformation and decay and, since Pirenne, tracing the fall of the late antique political city and the rise of the medieval trading emporium has been part of the 'boundary wars' dividing the territory of the Medievalist from that of the Classicist. The increasing care with which early medieval and late antique layers of ancient communities have been excavated has also led to a significant increase in the archaeological information available and the fashionability of late antiquity has increased the availability of texts and translations of and studies on the major authors of the period. The expansion of available information necessitates studies that bring together archaeological and textual material. Indeed, recent years have seen a plethora of such collections and the time approaches when we may need a synthesis of syntheses on the late antique city.

This particular volume contains twelve articles covering the fourth to the ninth centuries. The articles are, as is often the case in such volumes, somewhat uneven in quality and this contributes to a certain lack of focus in the volume: the overwhelming impression is one of confusion. All the authors would, I think, agree that there was transition but all seem to date that transition to different periods. Indeed, different forms of transition are discussed: transitions in urban morphology, notably concerning the development of Christian institutions and the decline of 'Classical' structures, and transitions in settlement pattern, relating to an alteration in the density of settlement or, in some cases, the abandoning of previously 'urban' sites. The conclusions reached often contradict and, indeed, sometimes attack the previous of others in the volume. Having the various contributors comment on the other articles may have been informative. This is particularly evident in Balzaretti's discussion of the Po valley (one of the best pieces in the collection) which questions Hodges' explanation of the

rediscovery of urbanism in the early medieval period as being based on emporia by suggesting that long-distance trade was only a marginal factor. Hodges' contribution does not debate the issue. Carver's essay also does not face Halsall's critique and one must, I suppose, await replies elsewhere.

This contributes to an impression of an absence of theoretical debate. Too often the articles elucidate the particular without reference to the general. There are exceptions: Ward-Perkins' entertaining initial survey questions the very nature of urbanism but the emergence of an overall picture of the transition between late antique and medieval cities is further hampered by the European bias of the collection. Only three contributions deal mainly with Africa and the East and of these Carver's study of the Islamic city seriously underestimates the extent of change in Africa and the East in the period from c. AD 500 - c. 800. Surely any attempt to reach a proper understanding of the developments in the West courts disaster if we do not see such transitions in the context of the possibly later but similar developments in the East, nor can we understand how urbanism was changed and eroded without considering the nature of urbanism and the ideological and economic infrastructure of the city. It is the fundamentals of the problem that are largely passed over in this collection.

Only Roskams faces this challenge. His article on the Maghreb develops an analysis of urban systems in the context of the pattern of rural exploitation, though his model rests heavily on a Marxist economic determinism and the crudity of the analysis of state/ landowner/ tax collectors/ peasant/ producers is such that although sympathetic to his aims, I fail to recognise the society outlined. I also find it difficult to accept that the roots of sixth-century decline lay in first-century economic changes.

The contributions from the other end of the transition, discussing the medieval rebirth of cities, offer more light on urbanism and its socio-economic base. Balzaretti, Hodges, and Halsall all offer divergent views of the early medieval economy, but there is, ultimately, a possibility of accepting a plurality of models to explain the origins of medieval urbanism in a way that is perhaps more difficult when faced with

a universal decline. One wonders whether the answer to the problem of the death of the late antique city might lie in exploring the nature of towns, as suggested by Ward-Perkins, and reaching a better understanding of the societal changes that led both to the decline and rebirth of the city.

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