

J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001. illus. pp. xvii + 479. ISBN 0 19 815247 7 (hbk) £70.00.

For many years Wolf Liebeschuetz has been contributing significant papers on the history of Roman government and urban culture of what we might conventionally and possibly inaccurately call the Early Byzantine period (c. AD 300- c. 700). This book is a culmination of those efforts, providing a synthesis of not only his views, but also enormous and complex sets of data, literary, documentary and archaeological, from all across the Empire. Nevertheless, this is not a rewriting of previously published papers, but a radically conservative statement that challenges a new orthodoxy among historians of late antiquity who tend to emphasise continuity, prefer 'transformation' to 'decline', and are deeply suspicious of grand historical narratives. For 'City' in the title, read 'Empire'.

With impressive energy and abundant evidence, L. defends previously slaughtered sacred cows. A notable favourite to return is the third-century crisis, restored to its position at the crux of imperial history and to capital-letter status ('With the Crisis of the Third Century, [the development of the Roman city] began to go into reverse, though the running down of the Empire-wide economic system was a process of long duration which proceeded at different speeds in different parts of the Empire' (p. 10)). Back too are the *curiales* and their interaction with the administrative system as the major dynamic of Roman urbanism. The 'epigraphic habit' reappears as a major signifier of urban health, its decline coinciding 'with a profound cultural change: the decline of the city as a political community and of the institutions and social and political attitudes which had found expression in the putting up of public monuments' (p. 11-12). Administrative reforms lead a process of change felt in the decline of long-established city institutions, such as gymnasia, the 'invasion' of public spaces by 'shoddy structures', and the 'decay' of aqueducts (p. 39), and the emergence of new social forces, such as Christianity and possibly new aristocracies. This 'fall' of the Roman city was uneven, some areas showing far more fondness for Classical forms, other areas displaying continuity in a single urban centre, further areas rejecting Classicism rapidly, but even the different trajectories of urban centres in the Early Byzantine period emphasise the 'breaking up of the unified imperial economy into regional economies' (p. 46).

This is an argument which deserves serious consideration. The Roman Empire imposed certain political structures on the Mediterranean lands, most notably civic government. It seems that the Augustan period onwards saw an expansion of urban centres and probably economic growth across much of the Empire, East and West. The case for associating these two phenomena seems persuasive. A subsequent political change, altering the institutions which had been indirectly responsible for development in the Roman imperial period, seems a 'common sense' explanation for urban decline. Those who doubt that an administrative institution could have such dramatic effects on economic structures should be assuaged by L.'s emphasis on the ability of Roman administration to generate an urban culture. Administrative change destabilising successful local cultures might be expected to produce just the ragged pattern of change that L. exhaustively identifies. Nevertheless, there are fundamental problems. The third and fourth centuries do not provide a decisive break in the administrative structures of cities. There are changes, but the *curiales* continued to function at least to the sixth century and probably beyond. Gaps in evidence, archaeological, papyrological, and epigraphic represent, primarily, gaps in evidence and not necessarily significant social or economic lacunae. We may use 'Roman' to describe broadly similar urban phenomena from across the Empire from the mid-first to third centuries AD, but Egyptian cities, for instance, were in continuous development over the early Empire, creating new spatial patterns and developing administrative and political structures. British, Syrian and Italian urban settlements also show a certain fluidity over time and distinct regional variations. If change and variety were normal, the developments of the third-fourth centuries seem less of a watershed in the history of Classical urbanism. The chronology of change is also difficult. The third century may be a 'Crisis' in certain areas, but seems to be less of a problem in others, sometimes striking in the second century, sometimes in the fourth. Changes in settlement patterns post- c. AD 350 in the archaeological record from Italy, Egypt, Syria, Britain and Gaul are immensely complicated, but only in Britain is the evidence suggestive of an unravelling system. L. writes interestingly of the prosperity of the Early Byzantine East, emphasising local patterns, but maintains that although the Eastern cities showed far more

resilience, and the post-curial government was not such a radical break with previous traditions as it was in the West, the same dynamics applied. Few would deny that cities in the East c. AD 450 were different from cities in the East c. AD 200, but, to my mind, many cities operated as well as ever.

Fundamentally, the theory of urbanism that underpins this work is too simple to explain the complexities of urban change in the Early Byzantine period. Although I accept that administration was important in the formation or development of urban centres throughout much of the Empire in the first centuries AD, it was probably only in the wilder fringes of the empire, places like Britain and the Danube frontier, that cities failed to develop other equally important functions. We only have to look at the recent history of British urban centres to see examples of cities formed on the basis of one factor (a form of mass industrial production), transformed to perform other functions within the settlement system. Such modifications of British urban systems are not just twentieth-century phenomena, but can be seen in the development of medieval cities of the fourteenth-century, in the expansion of trade in the early modern period, and in the new industrialisation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In all these periods, some cities declined and others profited. Taking the individual city as the unit of analysis, as is traditional in Classics, misleads, suggesting quasi-autonomous sociological entities, and may obscure complex variations within regions, whereas an approach which emphasises the 'urban system' within which cities interact seems to me to reflect better the diversity and complexity of Roman and Early Byzantine urbanism and allows more nuanced approaches to changes within the systems. This entails fundamental reanalysis of urban centres to establish whether and how these centres operate in relation to one another and reflect various socio-economic pressures. It is, however, a measure of the importance of this work that it should drive historians of urbanism to examine once more their understanding of the Roman city and develop new approaches to explain the undoubted 'transformations' in the urban systems of the Early Byzantine world.

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