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Introduction

Abstract

This volume of *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* gathers selected contributions from the workshop *City, Hinterland, and Environment: Urban Resilience in the Late Roman and Early Islamic Period*, held at the University of Bergen on September 23-25, 2019. Papers approach the topic from a variety of angles, including cultural and socioeconomic hinterlands and environments in their discussions of urban resilience. The meeting was part of the project *Globalization, Urbanization and Urban Religion in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Roman and Early Islamic periods* funded by Nordforsk (grant no. NOSHSWS-2 00052/NOS-HS), with a workshop on globalization taking place at the University of Helsinki in December 2018, and one on urban religion at Aarhus University in May 2019.

Recent years has seen an intense interest in urban studies, spurred by the fact that, according to the UN, since 2007 the majority of the world's population lives in cities for the first time in history. Cities are among the longest-lasting human institutions, with roots back to the ancient Near East, and with many ancient cities still providing powerful models for modern conurbations. Cities were central to ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern life, and formed focal points of political, religious, cultural, economic, demographic and symbolic importance. Thus, while urban studies are central to understanding ancient societies, urban history and archaeology also hold lessons, inspiration, parallels, and warnings for present-day urban communities.[1]

The aim of the Bergen workshop, and this volume, is to investigate a critical period of urban transformation in the Mediterranean area and the Near East, from the Late Roman Empire, its successor states, and the Early Islamic Empire, with a focus on the period from the 4th until the 9th century. Where early historiography emphasised the discontinuity represented by political change, scholars have long recognized that local communities, including cities, need to be understood within frameworks in which geopolitical change is just one of many variables, others showing continuity or changing at different pace.[2] Nevertheless, this period did witness dramatic change in every city in these regions, affecting numbers, sizes, and roles. Many urban centres were greatly reduced or even disappeared, while other flourished, and

[1] Smith 2010; Smith 2021.

[2] E.g., Fowden 1993; McCormick 2002; Sarris 2011.

new ones were founded. What made certain cities prosper and prevail, while others languished or perished?

Cities cannot be understood in isolation, but need to be studied in contexts of inter-urban networks as well as their interdependent relationships with their hinterlands.[3] Approaching cities in terms of their connections with their hinterlands and environments has roots in economic geography back to Walter Christaller's Central Place Theory,[4] but only made major inroads into archaeology in the 1960s. Recent hallmarks with relevance to the current project include the pioneering work of La Bianca, Hubbard and Running on food systems, and Horden and Purcell's pathbreaking work on connectivity and disconnections.[5] Hinterland is here to be understood as a broad concept not limited to a defined geographic area but depending on different types of relationships and ranging from immediate surroundings (microregions) to wide-ranging networks (dispersed hinterlands) and including social networks as well as geographical territories. Our aim is to progress beyond the current state of the art by juxtaposing the insights of these paradigm-founding texts with recent work that increasingly also emphasises that natural environments are not stable, but change, both as a result of human agency and of climate change.[6] Recent scholarship increasingly takes environmental factors into account. Intense anthropogenic stress in the urban hinterlands of the Roman period might have affected ecosystems, watershed patterns, and soil erosion.[7] This might have been exacerbated by simultaneous climate change, with a dramatic increase of cooler and drier conditions in the Near East from the middle of the 6th century until the latter half of the 8th century.[8] Resulting famines, amplified by prolonged warfare, made the population more exposed to pandemic disease, further increasing the stresses on cities in the region, and probably contributing to rapid urban transformation.[9] This is the background for the term "first millenium transition" in the title of the volume, by which we aim to take into account the range of ideological, cultural, economic, ecological and geopolitical factors that reshaped urban life in the Mediterranean and the Near East.

A key to integrate the history of the city with those of its hinterland and the historical environment might be found in resilience theory, which enables urban studies to move beyond debates on continuity versus change, and to investigate different adaptive strategies and which of these produced sustainable cities. Resilience theory developed as part of studies into ecological change but has also been set against long-term human response to such change. In this context most adaptations of resilience theory view the relationship between human society and its natural environment as an ever-adapting cycle, incorporating change as well as equilibria.

Resilience theory started to become more widely used within archaeology by the early 2000s.[10] It has also been applied to the late Roman and early Islamic worlds.[11] Much recent

[3] Horden, Purcell 2000; Raja, Sindbæk 2018; Raja, Sindbæk 2020.
[4] Christaller 1933.
[5] La Bianca *et al.* 1990; Horden, Purcell 2000.
[6] Kerner *et al*. 2015; Lawrence *et al*. 2016.
[7] E.g., Brown, Ellis 1995; Aldrete 2007.
[8] Labuhn *et al*. 2016.
[9] Harper 2017.
[10] Redman, Kinzig 2003; Redman 2005; McAnany, Yofee 2010. For a critique of the use of resilience theory in archaeology, see Rashidian 2021, and for a defence, see Bradtmöller *et al.* 2017.
[11] Walmsley 2007; Alston 2010; Haldon, Rosen 2018; Haldon *et al*. 2020.

work adopts resilience as a framework for understanding societal response to changes in the socio-economic or ideological environments, thus providing holistic or at least multiplex perspectives on how societies develop and change.[12] Resilience theory has provided urban historians and archaeologists with tools to address the longue durée development of cities and to integrate their traditional evidence documenting social, cultural, economic, and political history with environmental history and change. Cities of the past live on in modern conurbations and counterparts; studying the resilient city highlights how urban heritage and past may be activated in the present.

Earlier scholarship often viewed the urban transformation in the late Roman and early Islamic period as one of decline, but also as a period characterized by an astounding degree of urban persistence.[13] Resilience theory allows us to look beyond continuity and change, or stability and collapse, instead viewing the relationship between urbanism, nature, and culture as an ongoing adaptive cycle. From this vantage point, we may study the changes in ancient urbanism, not only as the product of ecological catastrophe[14] or imperial disintegration, but also as the deployment of different strategies to meet a variety of changing circumstances, with a multiplicity of resulting urban trajectories.

The papers included in this volume approach the problem of urban resilience from a range of angles, unapologetically applying resilience theory also with regard to socio-political and cultural contexts, the relationship between urban core and hinterland, as well as regional urban networks. We have chosen to divide the volume into three main parts, representing three different levels of interpretation.

The first part, called *Regions of Resilience*, applies a macro-perspective on city, hinterland, and environment by studying them at a regional level. The first contribution in this section, by Greg Woolf, looks at the whole Mediterranean network of cities, and asks where resilience is located in the ancient world, considering urban, imperial, and economic networks. The following paper, by John Bintliff, studies the Aegean region from the 5th until the 9th century, where very different strategies of urban resilience were adapted on the mainland, the islands, and on Crete, in the face of Slavic and Arabic expansion. Øystein S. LaBianca provides the last chapter on this section. With emphasis on the Decapolis-region of present-day Jordan and Israel, he addresses urban systems in the Levant in the Late Roman and Early Islamic periods, and the specific polycentric dynamics that sets this region apart from for example Egypt or Mesopotamia.

The next section of the volume is called *Hinterland and City* and moves down in scale to studies of specific sites and their relationships between urban core and surrounding hinterland. The first contribution, by Simon Malmberg, focuses on the heart of Empire, the city of Rome itself, and how the adaptive cycle model together with the concepts of vulnerability and sustainability can help us understand the complex relations between Rome and its hinterland, and how Rome prevailed as a large city into the medieval period. The following paper, by Rubina Raja and Eivind Heldaas Seland, provides a similar analysis, but this time applied to Palmyra in the Syrian desert, a city at the edge both of an empire and of land that could ecologically sustain a city. In their study of long-term resilience and vulnerability, they inte-

[12] Faulseit 2016; Bradtmöller *et al.* 2017; Middleton 2017.
[13] E.g., Liebeschuetz 2001; Krause, Witschel 2006; Lavan 2009; Dey 2014.
[14] E.g., Diamond 2005.

grate city and hinterland, and balance environmental change with economic, geopolitical, and socio-political factors.

The two papers that follow both provide specific human perspectives on the relationship between city and hinterland. The paper by Florian Wöller uses Libanios and Theodoret of Kyrrhos as two very different urban observers for the growing independence of rural communities around Antioch, and the increasing disconnect between city and countryside in the 4th and 5th centuries. Håkon F. Teigen provides a view from the opposite vantage point, that of inhabitants of the hinterland and their relationship to urban centres. He highlights how artisans and traders of the marginal community of Kellis, in the western desert of Egypt, drew on economic, imperial, and religious networks in a long effective, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt, to cope with the politically and ecologically challenging times of the 3rd and 4th century.

The last section of the volume looks specifically at resilience inside the urban core itself and is thus titled *Resilience in the City*. The first contribution, by Christina Videbech, brings us back to the centre of the city of Rome, the Forum Romanum itself. By applying the concepts of collective memory and resilience theory, she analyses how the inhabitants of the city could adapt the forum space to new uses, including Christian legends and practices. In the last paper of the volume, Christopher P. Dickenson looks at similar developments in two eastern cities, Jerash and Scythopolis, and how these cities from the 4th to the 7th century negotiated the publicness of space in view of realignments between elite and non-elite urban populations.

Resilience is not stability, but ability to recover. Responses and their outcomes varied, and not all cities were resilient in the long run, despite the best effort of their populations. Our hope is that this small collection of essays will contribute both to the study of the cases addressed and to ongoing debates on the changing nature of urbanism in the mid-late first millennium, by demonstrating how resilience theory might shed light on the way urban populations, cities and urban networks responded to the ecological and societal challenges that faced them in this formative period.

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