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Public Space and Cultural Resilience: Urbanism in the Near East in Late Antiquity

Abstract

The fate of public spaces has loomed large in discussions of what happened to Roman cities in the Near East in Late Antiquity. Much has been made of the way that temples, fora, bathouses and other amenities went out of use and shops, workshops and domestic premises encroached into squares and streets. Scholars who have seen this as evidence of vitality have made their case in largely economic terms with less attention for culture, thereby implicitly accepting the idea of a privatization of the city and a decline in public space. Ironically for earlier periods those same public spaces have often been seen as largely existing for the benefit of the local elite, a veneer of urban splendour that meant little to most inhabitants. This article challenges the simplistic way in which this approach has used ‘publicness’ as a label to be applied, drawing anthropological theory to see ‘publicness’ as a quality to be explored. Taking Scythopolis and Jerash as case studies it makes the case that public space provided a cushion for absorbing the stresses of economic and political change in Late Antiquity and was therefore a key contributor to the resilience of the culture of urban life.

Introduction

The cities of the Near East in Late Antiquity are of obvious interest for studying urban resilience in the past. The eastern Mediterranean was among the most heavily urbanized parts of the Roman Empire and its cities some of the most monumental. From the fourth century AD the region faced major political, social and economic upheavals. Some (Christianization, fragmentation of imperial control, disruption of trade networks) affected the Empire as a whole; others, (seismic activity and, later, Islamic conquests) were unique to the Near East.

1 This work was generously supported by the Danish National Research Foundation under the grant DNRF 119 – Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet). I have not been able to take full account of Luke Lavan’s new, monumental two volume work on “Public Space in the Late Antique City” since it appeared as I was finishing this article.
The cities by and large survived these challenges, though not without change. Many shrank in size, the republican, polis-model of political organization was replaced by more direct control by governors, bishops and notables and new crafts and trades became important. Most strikingly for the archaeologist, Roman public buildings such as temples, bath-houses and arenas were abandoned, ramshackle structures encroached into areas of open space, statues were taken down, churches were constructed and there was increased use of *spolia* for all types of buildings. Debate about these changes has centered on whether this is evidence for decline or continued success. The appearance of cities has largely been treated as a physical manifestation of underlying processes, a product of urban life, something that the historian should be able to read to measure urban vitality. There has been less concern for seeing the built environment as a medium through which social, political and cultural change took place.

It is possible and useful to approach both cities and their resilience in different ways. Taking a socio-economic or geographical approach means seeing cities as parts of settlement systems and using data to trace the growth or decline of individual settlements and connections between them. In approaching ancient cities in this way the presence or absence of public amenities in different periods can be taken as (proxy) data for assessing urban vitality. To use the concept of “resilience” in such an approach it makes sense to turn to other disciplines that have used the concept to understand complex systems, such as ecology.

One downside of this approach is that it, by its nature, tends to sideline the importance of culture or politics as drivers of historical change. Such an approach also casts little light on how cities were experienced in daily life. Seen in terms of statistics such as size and density of habitation, cities in different periods and parts of the world can look rather similar. Yet the experience of living in a city in Medieval China, Classical Greece, the Aztec Empire or the Near East in Late Antiquity would have been very different. A large part of that difference has to do with the nature of public life in different urban cultures. Looking at public spaces brings us to the heart of what we might call the character or personality of cities in the past. The extent to which this character of cities was able to endure stress, or might even have helped cities to survive crises, are important questions. To extend the metaphors of “character” and “personality” – and I stress these are metaphors – talking about this kind of “resilience” has less in common with the concept’s use in ecology than it does with psychology.

This article makes the case that it is useful to consider the transformation of public space in Near Eastern cities in Late Antiquity in terms of what I call “cultural resilience”. It asks what happened to the character of public space in those cities from the fourth to the sixth

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2 That the trajectory of urbanism in the Near East from the 4th-7th centuries AD was largely positive compared to other parts of the Mediterranean is illustrated by the sequential maps in Lavan 2021, 2-3.

3 The decline paradigm is most powerfully advanced by Liebeschuetz 2001, though without emphasis on the physical make up of the city. For proponents of continued vitality see here n. 11.

4 On public building activity in Roman cities as proxy data for the vitality of cities see Willett 2020; as proxy data for the level of economic activity, see Wilson 2014. While not focused on Late Antiquity or resilience Hanson, Ortman et al. 2019 have recently argued that quantification and measurement of public spaces produces data that can reveal underlying patterns of Roman urbanism.

5 Recent overviews of resilience theory in urban geography make the debt to ecology explicit: Meerow, Newell 2016, Meerow, Newell et al. 2016. On taking an ecologically inspired approach to the resilience of ancient cities, see Woolf, this volume.

6 For a broad comparative approach see Smith, Lobo 2019.
centuries AD and considers whether public life in any way might have cushioned the impact of stress and made cities more likely to survive or thrive. Two case studies are discussed, Jerash and Scythopolis, cities that are relatively well known archaeologically and whose public spaces developed along very different trajectories. They are also two cities that have been compared in an article by Hugh Kennedy, though without an explicit focus on the nature of publicness or resilience.\textsuperscript{7} In tackling both the period and region I am straying beyond my expertise. This is by no means an exhaustive treatment but an argument for a new line of enquiry. The argument has implications not only for Late Antiquity, but also for how we approach cities in earlier periods of the Roman Empire. It is therefore useful to begin with some general remarks about how modern scholars have approached Roman “publicness” and the impact this has had on interpreting change in Late Antiquity.

**Public Space and the Late Antique City**

Modern debate has cast the contrast between the city at the height of the Roman Empire and in Late Antiquity as a set of oppositions (FIG. 1). Under the high Empire the appearance of the city was monumental, ordered, coherent, reflected elite taste and existed primarily because of cultural and political imperatives. In Late Antiquity cities were ramshackle, incoherent in their appearance, saw widespread encroachment by non-elite structures and existed primarily for economic reasons. These dichotomies bring the high imperial city closest to the ideal model of the “consumer city”, or what Michael Smith and José Lobo have recently and usefully called the “political city”, and the late antique city to the “producer city”, or Smith and Lobo’s “economic city”.\textsuperscript{8} For the Near East a further cultural opposition can be added to the list. There these transformations have also been seen as a reassertion of a regional urban culture in opposition to Graeco-Roman culture. For our purposes the most striking opposition is that the high imperial city has been characterized as dominated by public spaces, the Late Antique city by private building.\textsuperscript{9} Gideon Avni, who has explicitly talked about the survival of the Near Eastern city in terms of resilience, has seen the increasing privatization of public space, or what he calls “concretat[ion] on functional approaches”, as the main strategy by which resilience was achieved.\textsuperscript{10} In other words, cities that managed to survive did so by sacrificing their public spaces. Even those who have challenged the idea that the city declined in Late Antiquity have accepted that much that was characteristic about public life under the earlier Empire was lost, since they make their case primarily in economic not cultural terms.\textsuperscript{11} Yet there is something peculiar about how public space has been seen in this discussion.

\textsuperscript{7} Kennedy 2000.
\textsuperscript{8} Smith, Lobo 2019. The value of their new distinction is that it shifts the emphasis from the functions cities fulfil to the reasons for their existence.
\textsuperscript{9} That the development of the late antique city as characterized by a usurpation of public areas by private space is explicitly pointed to by Saradi 2008, 319-321.
\textsuperscript{10} Avni 2011, 328-329.
\textsuperscript{11} For an argument for the vitality of the late antique city on mainly economic grounds, see Jacobs 2009 and Jacobs 2013. Hendrik Dey has recently argued for the continued cultural vitality of the late antique city but, his focus on cities as stages for visits of governors and other imperial dignitaries rather sidelines the day-to-day experience of life for people who lived in cities, Dey 2015. Luke Lavan’s work is far more multifaceted and certainly demonstrates the vibrancy of public life in late antique cities, but even he stops short of arguing that nothing about public life declined. At the outset of his recent monumental two-volume work on “Public Space in the Late Antique City”, he explicitly stresses that whether
Kevin Butcher’s description of what happened to the cities of Syria in Late Antiquity is illustrative. Butcher writes that: “[in Late Antiquity] the idea of controlled, monumental spaces gave way to what might be termed the anarchy of user sovereignty, just as the relationship between power and public performance or activity was severed when civic government passed to the grandees who operated out of the public eye. By the time of the Muslim conquest the classical city was already dead”. Butcher’s “death” of the Roman city is characterized by a non-elite takeover of the cities’ monumental civic centers. Butcher goes further in insisting on the deceptive nature of the monumentality of the Near Eastern city: “With its emphasis on monumental public amenities the Graeco-Roman city might seem to express collective will and collective ideals, but it was really an environment celebrating the aspirations and social power of a relatively small proportion of the population”. He also emphasizes the elite nature of these spaces, writing of an “excess of visibility...[that]... was the product of a climate peculiar to the Roman empire, in which the ideals of the Greek polis and the needs of the Roman government converged. Its manifestation in Syria was particularly spectacular and is a demonstration of how useful Greek ideals were to the rule of both the local elites and Rome”. The monumental spaces Butcher has in mind – forums, colonnaded streets, theatres, bathhouses and amphitheaters – would usually be categorized as “public”, but his vision has far reaching implications for what we understand that label to mean. Butcher’s argument is essentially that these monumental spaces constitute little more than a veneer of publicness, only really serving the interests of members of the local elite and not those of the rest of the urban population.

This way of thinking about public space in Greek and Roman cities is common and has a long history. A.H.M. Jones called the ancient city “a social phenomenon, the result of the predilection of the wealthier classes for the amenities of urban life.” Recently Lucy Grig has argued for the continued vitality of the late antique city while including the significance given to public monuments in earlier scholarship as part of an “unashamedly elitist viewpoint”. Hugh Kennedy, in his seminal article on the fate of Near Eastern cities in Late Antiquity, *From Polis to Madina*, presented it almost as a golden rule that public space could only ever be the product of top down control protecting it from encroachment by private interests. Warwick Ball has seen the public splendor of Near Eastern cities under the high Empire as “superficial Romanisation” that rapidly disappeared when local cultures reasserted themselves in Late Antiquity. Very similar arguments have been made for other parts of the Em-

the areas of continuity he identifies outweigh evidence for change is an “assessment...best left for others to make”, Lavan 2021, 10. See also Lavan 2006.

12 Butcher 2003, 269.
13 Butcher 2003, 259.
14 Jones 1954, 170.
15 Grig 2013, 564.
16 Kennedy 1985, 18; “…public, open spaces, be they narrow suqs or wide colonnaded streets, will always be under pressure. They will only survive if they fulfil a perceived and generally acknowledged purpose and are protected by an active and vigilant civic authority”.
17 “Observers have been dazzled by the Corinthian capitals which adorn these buildings without looking beyond to the deeper architectural concepts which determine their basic form. Ancient Near Eastern architectural forms had a tenacity, which survived and still survive in the form of Islamic mosques to this day. Before the Macedonian conquests imparted an east-west political division on the Near East, the entire area was culturally far more unified than the brief, superficial appearance of Graeco-Roman art forms might imply”, Ball 2000, 396.
pire. Dominic Perring has argued that the monumental forum-basilica complexes constructed in Britain in the second century AD – monumental by local, not Near Eastern standards – were not real public spaces but essentially settings for the local elite to display their Romanitas. The increasing monumentality of Greek agoras under the Empire has been widely seen as symptomatic of the oligarchisation of the polis, a decline in publicness and a departure from a supposed Classical, democratic golden age when agoras were little more than open spaces lacking splendid architecture.

There are several problems with this way of thinking about ancient publicness. Firstly, as I have argued elsewhere, urban vitality cannot so be so easily read from the archaeological record. There is nothing inherent to grand public architecture that means it must be seen as evidence for elite dominance. Secondly, recent historical work has powerfully challenged the idea that power in Roman cities was completely concentrated in the local oligarchic cliques. Research on euergetism has stressed the way that the culture of elite munificence constituted a real negotiation of power between the elite and the rest of the urban population. The implausibility of seeing elite benefactions of buildings as solely serving the interests of the elite comes into sharp focus if we reflect on the case of Roman bath buildings. Paying for construction of bathhouses certainly brought increased public standing for elite benefactors, but for the elite to actually use bathhouses meant rubbing shoulders and sharing oil and water with members of the lower classes; furthermore, while the elite could advertise their status at the baths – through their bearing, their speech and their company – stripping naked removed many of the ways in which they set themselves apart from the lower classes in other settings. The leveling effect of public bathing meant that the masses benefitted from them to a far greater degree than those who paid for them. The balance of power in theatres, arenas, forums and colonnaded streets might have been more skewed in favor of the elite but these spaces, too, were spaces of real interaction between different status groups and different subgroups within the urban population. The decline of euergetism and the resulting decreasing monumentality of public spaces in the late antique city can be explained in a number of ways – as the result of reduced elite wealth, a changed cultural and religious climate that discouraged the vanity of public munificence, the rise of a new aesthetic, or the reduced influence of the lower classes to coerce the elite to part with their money – but there is no need to take the development as evidence that those spaces had never really been public.

Scholarship of modern cities has seen it as an intrinsic property of public space that it is space produced through interaction, contestation and negotiation between different groups within urban society. Far from being safeguarded by top-down intervention, public space is

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19 This vision is discussed (and challenged), with references, in Dickenson 2017, but is perhaps most explicitly asserted by Shear 1981 focusing on Athens, and Kolb 2005.
21 Zuiderhoek 2008, Zuiderhoek 2009; for the Hellenistic city, John Ma has made the same argument, focusing not on what benefactors gave but on one of the main rewards they received, statues, Ma 2013.
22 Garrett Fagan has convincingly demonstrated the range of strategies by which the elite would have mitigated the leveling effect of mingling with lower classes at the baths, Fagan 1999, 206-219. My point is that it was not directly in the interests of the elite to create a setting in which such strategies were needed.
23 All considered by Loseby 2009.
thus more likely to be the result of interaction between bottom up pressure against those in power. Thus seen “public space” is not a label to be uncritically applied in opposition to “private space” – the way the term has typically been used in scholarship of the ancient city – but instead a relative property of space that varies in terms of the people and behavior allowed there between different cultures, between different cities and indeed between different spaces within a particular city. A modern leisure center is not public in the same way as a town square, neither is public in the same way as a Roman bathhouse or forum, and publicness in Roman cities was not the same as in modern ones. Seen in these terms the nature of public space in ancient cities is worth investigating because it brings us to the heart of what made the urban culture of those cities distinctive. Rather than simply identifying spaces as public we can ask how and to what extent they were public. We can do this for cities of the high Empire, we can do it for the cities of Late Antiquity and we can explore changes and continuities in the nature of publicness between these periods. To do so brings us to the heart of understanding the character of those cities.

Case Study 1 – Scythopolis

Scythopolis was arguably the city in the Roman Near East – possibly in the whole Roman Empire – that in Late Antiquity bore most resemblance to the highly monumentalized cities that had characterized earlier centuries. Under the high Empire, the city had been a fairly small place with around 15-18,000 inhabitants. It nonetheless boasted the full range of public amenities that we would expect to see: temples, bathhouses, colonnaded streets, a basilica, two theatres, a nymphaeum and a hippodrome. Some of these spaces went out of use in Late Antiquity, but it was surprisingly in that period that the city reached the height of its monumental splendor. The so-called eastern bathhouse was restored in the fourth century, as was a monumental nymphaeum – by a governor – at the turn of the fifth. It was in the fifth and sixth centuries, however, that new building projects took the city to new heights of grandeur. New monumental streets were laid out and a semi-circular plaza known as the “sigma” was constructed alongside one of them opposite an open space that the excavators have called the “Byzantine agora”. On the other side of that agora the so-called “Silvanus Hall”, a basilica-like building, was constructed, and next to that in the late fifth and sixth century the “Eastern Baths” were constructed. The complex was admittedly smaller than the grandest bath buildings of earlier centuries, but it approaches their scale more closely than most baths elsewhere in Late Antiquity. A reconstruction map of the heart of Scythopolis’ center in the sixth century (Fig. 2) certainly stands comparison with the monumental civic centers of cities of earlier times.

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25 As Don Mitchell puts it: “[public space] has never been guaranteed. It has only been won through concerted struggle, and then, after the fact, guaranteed (to some extent) in law” (my italics to emphasize the opposition to Avni’s view of public space as cited in the main text), Mitchell 2003, 5.
26 Tsafrir, Foerster 1997, 94.
28 A succinct summary of the late antique building projects is given by Avni 2011, 303-305. For a detailed discussion see Tsafrir, Foerster 1997, 99ff.
29 This Silvanus was a local Samaritan of consular rank who together with his brother had obtained money from Anastasius I for construction of public buildings at the city including repairing the walls, Patrich 2001, 81-82.
Scythopolis’ late antique urban splendor can largely be explained by historical contingency: some time at the beginning of the fifth century the city was made the capital of Palestina Secunda. The provision of public space at the city under the high Empire is clearly then not the reason for its later success. The city does, however, at the very least present evidence for the resilience of an earlier idea of Roman urbanism into the period, and of the city as a container for keeping that idea alive. Kennedy has, unsurprisingly, seen Scythopolis’ late antique monumentality as representing a top-down, centralized effort to keep the classical city alive, along the lines of Justinian’s building program. The fact that this ideal remained visible at few sites, however, is not necessarily evidence that it was a purely elite ideal. Availability of resources and changing priorities certainly played a role in reducing expenditure on public building. Decreased public building, therefore, does not prove a decreased desire among people lower down the social ladder to live in such cities. On the contrary, the construction of the amenities at Scythopolis implies a receptive audience among the general population of the city. Of course, we face the same problems we face for all periods of antiquity in deciding how, by whom and how frequently buildings and spaces were used. The ruins of buildings cannot be made to speak, and evidence of daily use is only sporadically retrieved in situ. There is, however, no reason to see the civic center of late antique Scythopolis as consisting of anything other than real public spaces designed to be used by the urban community. Note that one of the buildings provided was a bathhouse!

Accepting these ostensibly public spaces at face value it is possible to make a number of provisional suggestions as to the nature of publicness at late antique Scythopolis and how these spaces might have helped the city to thrive as an urban community. The decoration of public colonnades with mosaics – a widespread phenomenon by no means unique to Scythopolis – made a form of decoration long associated with the private realm and bathhouses more readily accessible in daily life. As such it is tempting to read the development as representing an increase in the influence of the non-elite in public space. Kennedy is right to note the absence of benefactions by members of the local elite, but it is striking that in one of the few examples that is attested there epigraphically the benefactors remain anonymous, being described merely as “those whose name is known by God”. While piety is surely, in part, a genuine motivation for this modesty, we should not ignore the political implications. These members of the local elite no doubt enjoyed rewards of wealth and status in the city, but the community denied them the permanent record of the benefaction that they would have received in earlier centuries. The habit of recording benefactions, not prominently on the architraves of buildings but rather inlaid in mosaics might also reflect a shift in the nature of the relationship between elite and non-elite inasmuch as it arguably reduced the prominence of the message. The medium may also have subtly worked to change the nature of the way that benefactions were understood by drawing attention not so much to the utility of the buildings themselves but to their decoration and thereby the way that they ornamented the city. There was thus both continuity and change in the nature of publicness at Scythopolis – continuity in the ways that the local and imperial elite used sponsorship of public buildings to negotiate

30 Tsafrir, Foerster 1997, 86.
31 Kennedy 2000, 204-205.
32 Butcher 2003, 266.
33 Tsafrir, Foerster 1997, 119.
their position vis-à-vis the rest of the urban populace, change in how that relationship was articulated and in the degree to which the elite were given prominence.

Case Study 2 – Jerash

The Decapolis city of Jerash with an estimated population of c.20,000 people was by no means one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, but by the third century AD it was heavily monumentalized as its well-known surviving remains attest (Fig. 3).\(^{34}\) In Late Antiquity the civic landscape underwent striking changes in line with those seen throughout the Empire, mentioned in the introduction. The city’s two major temples to Zeus and Artemis were abandoned; and became used for new functions (see below).\(^{35}\) The theaters and amphitheater clearly ceased to be used for performances as they were taken over by new functions (see below). There was encroachment of private industrial and commercial structures into the city’s monumental oval plaza and its main colonnaded avenues.\(^{36}\) A major processional way that connected the two parts of the city, which were separated by a large ravine and led to the Temple of Artemis, went out of use. Hugh Kennedy has reasonably seen the declining importance of these public streets as a knock-on effect of the changed topography of the city resulting from the other public monuments going out of use. It is less clear whether the city’s two large public bathhouses remained in use, but the city was certainly given a new public bathhouse in the mid fifth century – albeit on a much more modest scale – attached to the city’s cathedral and paid for by a local bishop.\(^{37}\) In addition to the cathedral, no less than seven churches were constructed in the fifth or sixth centuries, paid for either by bishops or local benefactors, transforming Jerash into an ostentatiously Christian city.

Archaeology has given us a relatively rich view of commercial and craft activity taking place in Late Antiquity in areas that had been public spaces under the earlier empire. The temenoi of the sanctuaries of Zeus and Artemis have both yielded evidence for pottery production, as has the hippodrome, which also accommodated a late antique cemetery.\(^{38}\) The cella of the Temple of Artemis was, remarkably, converted into a house, and there are indications that the same might have been true of the Temple of Zeus.\(^{39}\) In the heart of the city a thermopolium has been identified on a side street near the old Artemision and a macellum was in use into the late fifth century; at some later point the building was radically altered with some of its outer rooms refurbished and fitted with mosaics as a benefaction by a local councilor, its central space incongruously converted into an establishment for dying cloth.\(^{40}\)

This evidence has, predictably, been seen as the takeover of the city by private space. The approach to public space advocated here, however, suggests it might be more profitable to

\(^{34}\) On the monuments of Jerash see Raja 2012, 137-190, with a full list of earlier scholarship and also the brief summary in Butcher 2003, 250 For the population estimate, see Kraeling 1938; 12 and accepted as plausible by Kennedy 2000, 201.

\(^{35}\) Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018, 120 with references.

\(^{36}\) On rural looking dwellings in the oval plaza, Butcher 2003, 266.

\(^{37}\) Kennedy 2000, 120; Kraeling 1938, 265-269.

\(^{38}\) For all of these areas and a focused discussion of the hippodrome, see Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018, and Kehrberg-Ostrasz and Ostrasz 2017.

\(^{39}\) See Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018, 120, with references.

\(^{40}\) For the macellum, see Uscatescu, Martín-Bueno 2018.
consider the ways that these spaces facilitated negotiation and contestation of relationships between different groups within society. None of these establishments stood in isolation and each must be seen as part of a larger spatial context. The dyers and the thermopolium imply the presence of customers and, potentially, passing trade. Particularly in the case of the thermopolium all indications suggest a largely non-elite clientele. Seen in terms of publicness the emergence of such spaces at these locations therefore has potential implications for how the non-elite asserted their position within society. Furthermore, the reduced, though not inconsiderable areas of open space in the two sanctuaries and the hippodrome would undoubtedly have been places of interaction between potters and their customers and between the different craftsmen and their families. There are indications that part of the hippodrome was still in use for some kind of spectacle as late as the fifth century.41 These spaces would also have been charged with different layers of meaning, perhaps relating to their earlier use and history, and in the case of the hippodrome, perhaps connected to the close proximity of the dead. The reception of these spaces and the associations they carried for different segments of the population will have played a role in how those different groups related to them and to one another. In short, rather than interpreting the growing prominence of traders in terms of the “privatization” of the city there is much to be gained from seeing it as an evolution of new kinds of publicness. In addition, even more so than at Scythopolis, euergetism is particularly well attested for Late Antique Jerash, mainly now directed toward church building.42 Several benefactions were made by governors, a widespread phenomenon in the Late Antiquity, but a handful of building projects were paid for by local bishops and even, as mentioned above, a town councilor.43 The architectural development of the built environment therefore also continued to serve, as it had in earlier times, as a channel through which political relations within the community were given permanent expression.

Conclusion

The transformations of the appearance of the civic centers of cities in Late Antiquity are dramatic and have understandably caught the scholarly imagination. Rather than seeing these changes simply as the outward symptoms of underlying social, political and cultural change the argument here is that there is much to be gained from exploring the ways that the physical space of the city was intricately bound up with those changes. The central tenet of the so-called “spatial turn” is that space is no mere backdrop to human activity, but that the two exist in a complex dialectic relationship. Although a considerable amount of recent research has attempted to apply this insight to the ancient world, our understanding of the ways that society and space were intertwined in the ancient city remains fragmentary. Two particularly promising areas for further research are the nature of publicness in the Roman World and the transformation of cities in Late Antiquity.

This article has focused on the intersection of these two lines of enquiry with a specific focus on the Near East. It has argued that there is much to be gained in terms of understanding how and why cities survived the tribulations of the period, and how their character

41 Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018, 120.
42 Kennedy 2000, 201.
43 The evidence is assembled by Uscatescu, Martín-Bueno 2018 in putting the benefaction of the macellum in context.
changed, by focusing on the transformation of their public spaces. Seeing those transformations in terms of an opposition between private and public space is overly simplistic. To characterize the transformations of the late antique city as ‘privatization’ of public space obscures the complex and manifold ways in which urban space served as an arena and a channel through which relationships between different segments of the urban population were reshaped. That view comes close to denying the very existence of public space for the late antique city and is particularly unhelpful when, as argued here, the existence of real publicness has also been called into question for earlier periods. The approach taken here took as its point of departure a more nuanced understanding of publicness, not as an absolute category of space to be applied as a label, but rather as a quality present in cities of all times and periods yet varying in nature and degree. Investigating the nature of publicness, the ways in which different groups of an urban population interact, therefore brings us closer to understanding the distinctive character of cities in different times and places, and examining the shifting nature of publicness over time offers a more powerful way of thinking about social and cultural change than talking about publicness in terms of its presence or absence.

The nature of publicness at both Scythopolis and Jerash certainly changed in Late Antiquity, and in very different ways at the two sites. Yet at both cities those changes are highly suggestive of continued interaction between elites and non-elites and subgroups within both categories. Suggestions have been made as to how those changes might be interpreted. Scythopolis is best characterized by the continuation of centuries old forms of monumentality, Jerash more by the emergence of the new urban aesthetic widely documented throughout the Roman world. Yet at both sites I have suggested areas in which the non-elite became increasingly prominent. We should certainly not imagine that the elite took over control of the late antique city, but rather than interpret this development in terms of privatization of the city, thinking of it in terms of a change in the nature of publicness refocuses our attention to the implications for shifting power relations between elites and non-elites in this period. It was a commonplace of ancient literature that men not walls made the city, and if we apply this truism to inquire how cities survived periods of stress and crisis then we need to explain the resilience not of architectural agglomerations but of communities. The approach to space and the emphasis on publicness advocated here, however, suggests that buildings and society are profoundly and intricately intertwined, and that we cannot understand one without the other. It is the nature of archaeological evidence that we are left with evidence of only one of those two threads, yet by asking the right questions of the ancient built environment we can begin to at least catch glimpses of the more human dimension of social and cultural change. The built environment surely did serve as an arena and medium for social and cultural change to play out, and through its adaptability public space certainly did contribute to the long-term resilience of ancient cities in the Near East and elsewhere.

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Fig. 1 – Overview of oppositions in how scholars have seen the high Roman and Late Antique city.
Fig. 2 – A reconstruction map of the heart of Scythopolis’ center: the Caesareum and the Odeum (after Mazor, Najjar, Amos 2007, p. 12. CC BY-NC 4.0).
FIG. 3 – Ancient Jerash with the “Oval Plaza” in the foreground. Photo by Marlena Whiting. Reproduced with her kind permission.