

## The Mediterranean at the Periphery of Urban Origins

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**Abstract:** The legacy of the intellectual turn towards networks and interdependence over the first twenty years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has led to the dismantling of ethnocentric perspectives on the ‘ancient city’ in the Mediterranean. Scholarship in Mediterranean archaeology is furthermore no longer interested in urban origins; the consequences of urbanism are nowadays, on the other hand, the object of lively research. This development runs parallel to new data and research in regions north of the Alps that give us a multifarious and complex picture of urbanism, which runs counter to any centre-periphery narrative vis-à-vis the Mediterranean. The proceedings of *Crossing the Alps* have furthermore demonstrated that what cities do is more compelling than questions about their origins.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean urbanisation; Social construction of urbanism; Comparative approaches.

### Introduction

Stimulated by the latest research on Trypillia sites in Ukraine sometimes defined as ‘mega-cities’ (Chapman *et al.* 2019; Gaydarska *et al.* 2019 with previous bibliography), global perspectives have foregrounded varieties of early urbanism, thus raising fresh interest in the origins, character, and function of urban forms at a supra-regional and global scale (Wengrow 2015; Frangipane and Manzanilla 2018). Moreover, they have generated much impetus towards debunking ethnocentric concepts of urbanism and therefore reconsidering or proposing afresh models, definitions, or attributes that are heuristically useful for comparative analysis across time and space (Smith 2016; more generally Fernández-Götz and Krauss 2016a; Gyucha 2019). Among the consequences of these recent research developments, two seem to me to be particularly striking as far as the broader region and object of analysis of the conference *Crossing the Alps* are concerned: firstly, the realisation that there is no monolithic urban form. On the contrary, the variety of what we consider to be urban is not only detected cross-culturally and trans-regionally, but also within a single regional context, as seen in 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC continental Europe north of the Alps, or

even at a single site, as remarkably demonstrated by the large settlement of the Heuneburg on the Upper Danube in southwest Germany where low-density urbanism co-existed with zones of high density habitation (Krausse *et al.* 2016).

Indeed, most recent comparative research on urbanisation has underlined the importance of distinguishing between urbanism and dynamics of population aggregation (Gyucha 2019). At the same time, scholarship on the Classical city *par excellence* has noted the role of such dynamics at a regional level in the making of Athens and the different temporal scales of engagement with Athens by neighbouring communities, which was part and parcel of urban life (Osborne 2019). The second consequence is the instability and non-linear evolution of urbanism especially when we consider the social hierarchisation that is usually associated with it and the role of the intensification of power in promoting urbanism, whichever form it might take (Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2014; Fernández-Götz and Krausse 2016b, 12-14; 2016c, 331), but, at the same time, in undermining social stability (Smith 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Global perspectives may thus seem to have benefitted how we think of cities at the so-called centre within Eurasia, that is to say, the Mediterranean, as much as its periphery, which, we should strongly argue, is and should no longer be deemed so. In fact, this benefit from global perspectives is not as real as it may seem, as I point out below.

In this short paper, I intend to do the following: 1) in emphasising 20-year-old attempts at assailing the urban category in the Mediterranean, I examine the varied effects of these attempts since then and the extent of their impact beyond the basin; 2) I draw out and wish to underline interdependence and exchange as a constant of the *Crossing the Alps* conference programme more than early urbanism and its origins, a trend that follows from earlier attempts at understanding Mediterranean urbanisation itself (Cunliffe and Osborne 2005) and network thinking more generally, and hence the dynamics, rather than the statics, of urbanism (Purcell 2005); 3) lastly, I wish to advocate for more on what cities do and less on cities' origins. Insisting on origins and/or early stages rather than effects ultimately constrains us into a narrower path of definitions and attributes (Smith 2016) and a continuing distinction between centre and periphery rather than providing a mechanism for truly comparative analysis that combines micro- and macro-scale approaches to the evidence over a longer-term than we care to allow: the Classical city can be part and parcel of such comparative analysis along with the Neolithic mega-city of Ukraine. Interdependence and exchange, on the other hand, are two of the many causes and effects that we can explore in linking the socio-political

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<sup>1</sup> See Wengrow (2019) for an argument, from a global comparative perspective, against social evolution

dimension of what cities do, which includes the immaterial world of religion and ideology, including the social construction of urbanism and related ideas (e.g. citizenship/community membership), with the economic one, which has come to the fore in some most recent and forthcoming studies of urbanism in the Mediterranean (Manning 2018; Loy in press a and b).

### **The problematisation of the urban category and its impact across the Mediterranean**

Scholars of the Iron Age and Archaic Mediterranean seem to be suffering from urbanisation fatigue: in an introduction chapter to a forthcoming volume from a conference - *Making Cities* - on Mediterranean urbanism and economic production, C. Smith (in press) reluctantly speaks of urbanisation, and instead prefers to define it as a package of settlement change, population aggregation, and the consequences of both.

It is easy to see the source of this reluctance in the explicit focus of *Making Cities* on the economic impact of urbanism rather than urban origins (Gleba and Marin Aguilera in press), but we are undoubtedly heirs to the last twenty years of scholarship, which has progressively abandoned origins in favour of interaction and relationships: urban consequences, not urban beginnings, have now taken centre stage. While this is a result of broader 21<sup>st</sup> century network thinking in the social and historical sciences, the earliest argument in favour of doing without origins was also and simultaneously a plea to avoid the urban category altogether, which was strongly rebuffed by ancient historians (Harris 2005, 29-34; Shaw 2001, 444-447), in a paradigm-changing attempt to explain the long-term history of the Mediterranean in its fragmentation, ecological uncertainty, strategies for interdependence, and vital connectivity (Horden and Purcell 2000).

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw this paradigm-changing attempt take effect, directly or otherwise, right at the centre of Mediterranean urbanism, namely the Greek world, as evolutionary and ethnocentric ideas on the (Aristotelian) city were starkly laid bare, the *polis* as we knew it came under attack (Vlassopoulos 2007a; 2007b), and a new impetus to understand alternative forms of Greek political communities came to the fore (Hall 2016, 286-288; Morgan 2003; on these developments see Riva 2014). At the same time, comparative analysis on urbanisation on a Mediterranean-wide level has also highlighted interdependence to explain the phenomenon and hence the inherent dynamics of it (Osborne 2005), as well as the normality of change *vis-à-vis* social constructions of urbanism, of its time and its permanence (Purcell 2005; more on this below). Attention to Mediterranean-wide urbanism has also provided a much needed view of Rome's urban making *vis-à-vis* other polities, such as Corinth and Syracuse, with similar urban trajectories and economic

needs before Rome's distinctively military and political strategies to accommodate an increasingly larger state were adopted (Purcell 2010; see also Terrenato 2019). Long-term perspectives, as far as the 1<sup>st</sup>-millennium-BC Mediterranean is concerned, have moreover afforded not simply the analysis of later changing relationships between cities resulting from the emergence of hegemonic states, such as Rome itself or Carthage and their larger, far-reaching structures transcending the city-state, but also an understanding of how coeval Greek historiography saw the emergence of *polis* alternatives, which Rome and Carthage represented, thus problematising the *polis*' political and social organisation itself (Purcell 2017, esp. 342-344).

The problematisation of Mediterranean urbanism has thus come full circle as modern historians and archaeologists have dismantled older scholarly traditions at the very heart of the so-called ancient city. One cannot argue likewise for the regions traditionally placed at the conceptual margins of such a model, namely pre-Roman indigenous Italy, where evolutionary approaches have been strong enough to divide the peninsula between an urban core, namely the Central Tyrrhenian region with Rome and southern Etruria (Vanzetti 2004), and a periphery despite the availability of new finds across that periphery which allow us to paint an alternative scenario through a parallel perspective to that developed elsewhere (for Central Italy, see Riva 2014). Indeed, *Crossing the Alps* has systematically brought together scholars working on broader regions that have stood for too long at the margins of, respectively, the Mediterranean urban core, namely Central Europe, and the Italic core, namely northern Italy. But even at the urban core of Italy, despite the lion's share of scholarly attention received, lack of specific sets of data, *i.e.* detailed evidence of comparable quality to what we have for the Heuneburg today, about the rural sites surrounding the largest urban agglomerations and the internal organisation of these latter, has left questions on urbanisation still anchored to an elite-centred perspective (cf. Riva 2010). This is afforded by the evidence of cemeteries, elite houses, cult centres, and the earliest traces of urban monumentality and permanence such as fortification ditches and walls. While landscape approaches have tried to circumvent this problem (Stoddart 2016) and recent work has thrown important light on the internal road network and topography of the large south Etruscan agglomerations (Cascino 2019; Guaitoli 2016; Marzullo 2018; Materassi and Pacifici 2020; Pocobelli 2004), it remains symptomatic that one of the most important and decades-old field projects at these agglomerations have been largely limited to religious structures (Bonghi Jovino 2001; Bonghi Jovino and Bagnasco Gianni 2012; Bonghi Jovino and Chiaramonte Treré 1997; Chiaramonte Treré 1999; though now see Marzullo 2018).

A salutary contrast is given to the western Mediterranean with particular reference to the Iberian Peninsula where research has never been haunted by the ethnocentrism of the so-called ‘ancient city’ (*sensu* Purcell 2010, 580). On the contrary, variability in the nature and patterns of settlements across the landscape, from Phoenician coastal towns to indigenous *oppida* of different forms and following different trajectories of continuity and change have prevented the fossilisation of single urban models or evolutionary perspectives. Additionally, they have led scholarly attention towards other questions in relation to those patterns, from colonial-indigenous relations, to economic production and the effects of the capitalisation on natural and symbolic resources by socially dominant groups across the landscape (Bonet Rosado and Mata Parreño 2009; Bonet Rosado *et al.* 2016). Power, in all its forms and practices, and at multiple scales from the landscape to the site and the object, has been ultimately at the centre of scholarship on the Iberian Iron Age rather than urbanism *per se* (Grau Mira 2014; Grau Mira and Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez 2018).

### ***Crossing the Alps: the effects and consequences of urbanism***

Indeed, research questions on economic processes of production and redistribution and the socio-political mechanisms that fuelled them and were, in turn, stimulated by them, seem to have been at the centre of the debates at *Crossing the Alps* more than early urbanism and its origins, despite the programmatic intention to discuss the latter. Earlier discussions on recent field research across the Alps that has radically changed our views on urbanisation in the region have, after all, already emphasised the ability of urban settlements to develop an economic system of ‘agglomeration’, a phrase borrowed from geography, and connectivity across their hinterland (Brun and Chaume 2013, 326).

At the same time, recent claims (Smith 2016, 164-166) that ancient or pre-modern urbanism was of a political rather than economic nature fails to recognise that political power in such early urban contexts, whether of rulers or elites, was ultimately the power to attract and monopolise exchange and resources as well as to stimulate local production, directly or otherwise. Importantly, this power could not only have been about maintaining prestige, as indicated by the funerary destruction of wealth, but also about capitalising on an ever widening network of contacts and interdependence (cf. map in Broodbank 2013, 508).<sup>2</sup> By gathering specialists across the different regions between northern Italy and Continental

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<sup>2</sup> See the so-called ‘Uruk expansion’ in Mesopotamia for a comparative case on the relationship between early urbanism and commercial expansion (Wengrow 2015)

Europe, *Crossing the Alps* has further highlighted the complex entanglement of this widening web (Brun and Chaume 2013, 327-329).

Recent research, furthermore, has employed novel archaeobotanical methods on assemblages from Early Iron Age sites in southwest Germany, including the Heuneburg, and has successfully built a multifarious picture of agricultural and therefore economic production, whereby local communities employed diverse strategies and practices for crop and animal husbandry. Yet, specific attention was paid to barley production that fed, literally as well as metaphorically, into local elites' diacritical feasts (Styring *et al.* 2017). This key finding demonstrates what has been argued for some time (Brun and Chaume 2013, 333-336), namely that the economic systems of the societies across the Alps were far more complex than previous assumptions about a so-called gift or a prestige economy ever allowed us to imagine. These assumptions, in fact, seem to be implicit in M.E. Smith's claim of the political nature of early urbanism; if so, it contains a primitivist prejudice and an evolutionary outlook that ultimately risks maintaining Continental Europe in a core-periphery relationship with the Mediterranean.

In a recent study on urban growth in Tyrrhenian Etruria, on the other hand, I have attempted to argue precisely against such a prejudice and outlook in reverse, that is to say, by problematising the transformation of exchange systems, away from the usual assumptions of a shift between a prestige and mercantile economy in 6<sup>th</sup>-century-BC Etruria (Riva 2017; in press).

The key point to be made, however, is that in the context of changing economies and interdependence, all cities are political, by which I mean ideological. However much or little hierarchy an urban society may have, certain aspects and elements of the built environment, from regular house plots to fortifications, some of which are deemed by archaeologists as evidence of the urban nature of a settlement (cf. attributes in Smith 2016, 159), may point to the materialisation of what Purcell has called 'ancient social theory', that is to say, the material manifestation of an urban order that is imposed, rather than organically produced, and is ideologically driven by a rhetoric of stability and permanence, of which we find a correspondence in later Greek and Roman literary sources (Purcell 2005, 260-262). While Classical Greek cities are the epitome of this phenomenon of the later 1<sup>st</sup>-millennium-BC Mediterranean, but which begins in the Archaic period, this argument may also fit some of the major agglomerations across the Alps. In discussing these latter, Fernández-Götz and Krause (2016b, 13) have aptly borrowed a Foucauldian phrase, 'a new technology of power', which seems to lead their argument in this direction. This by no means involves

taking a top-down approach to what urban centres and their structures did. On the contrary, recognising certain signatures of the built environment in terms of the rhetoric of stability and permanence means simultaneously considering the continuous challenge and disruption brought upon it by social interaction in and across these centres, which is inherently dynamic for the reasons –interdependence and economic networks– treated above.

One of the objects of study, in so far as is possible from the available sources, therefore remains the tension between this rhetoric and the disruption of it by socio-economic change, whether in the spatial, performative, and legal definition of private and public, the intervention, either by maintenance or destruction, into the materialisation of permanence, or other (Purcell 2005, 264-267). Importantly, this tension is also about an engagement with the concepts of time and temporality, itself a social construct, that is far from univocal or monolithic. On the contrary, anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians have widely shown that such concepts were open to multiple mnemonic practices, both below and at the level of the urban radar; they were furthermore open to manipulation and structuration both in their material and immaterial dimensions that ranged from cultural traditions and life cycles to ideological fabrications, epitomised by the mythology of city foundations and founders (Smith C. 2015, 365) or ritual deposits and interventions at highly symbolic foci like fortifications and gates (Grau Mira and Vives-Ferrándiz Sánchez 2018, 94-98), and other acts of memorialisation, commemoration and destruction (Herzfeld 2004; Lucas 2005; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003).

Whether and to what extent this tension between material permanence and social change applies to Iron Age Eurasia only, or can be extended to other forms of urbanism across time and space raises, in turn, the question on how far one can stretch the range of comparison. Recent global comparative analyses of early and pristine cities from Mesopotamia and Ukraine to China (Wengrow 2019), for instance, speak of civic identities and citizenship institutions counterbalancing power and wealth centralisation, and thus ensuring social cohesion. But how and to what extent the built environment responded to such institutions and identities has not yet been tackled (though see Stone *et al.* 2004). Such long-range comparisons between cases stretched so far and wide may ultimately prove beneficial. Closer to home, so to speak, examining the effects of an ideology of urban permanence in its different material forms is not only possible, but potentially fruitful. Some of the contributions at *Crossing the Alps* have been devoted to sites in northern Italy –Spina, Adria, Forcello di Bagnolo San Vito– where perishable material such as wood, straw, and reeds, made the built environment of the city. These three sites, often characterised as trade hubs

rather than cities, in fact, epitomise the role of interdependence and growing economic networks in the urbanism of this region (Komp *et al.*; Bonomi *et al.*; Mistireki and Zamboni this volume). Their urban plans are more or less coeval to that of Marzabotto, which controlled the southern route into Tyrrhenian Etruria (Govi *et al.* this volume). In fact, the adoption of the Greek Attic foot at Marzabotto, Spina, Forcello, and San Cassiano di Crespino, a small settlement in the hinterland of Adria (Govi 2017), suggests a shared system of city planning, and hence shared ideas of urban organisation and order (cf. Izzet 2007, 165-207). Yet, the wetland environment of brackish lagoons in the Valli di Comacchio, where Spina is located, and the employment of perishable construction materials superimposes on such ideas a different kind of urban time measured by different scales of duration and cycles not just in the building of the city, which included a large artificial water canal running north-south across the settlement and a network of smaller and minor canals in a remarkable feat of hydraulic engineering, but also in the maintenance and refurbishment of this network, house blocks, and other built structures (Cremaschi 2017; Purcell 2005 on maintenance rhythms; Zamboni 2017).

Hence, while archaeologists often cite durability as a criterion for urbanism (cf. Brun and Chaume 2013, 326), the above example highlights a tension between resilience –an ‘ancient social theory’ of urbanism encapsulated in the order of the city plan– and fragility, that is the ecological instability of an environment which required land reclamation even before habitation could be established (for Spina, see Marchesini and Marvelli 2017). Ultimately, we learn that fragile agglomerations are part and parcel of the same phenomenon of urbanism as the resilient ones (Fernández-Götz and Ralston 2017; Rondini and Zamboni this volume). The question of fragility and change, maintenance, and refurbishment, can furthermore be explored in social terms at the micro-scale of the house unit wherever the resolution of our evidence allows it. This is the case with Marzabotto, a site that has received remarkable scholarly attention since its discovery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Govi *et al.* this volume): here, the excavation of house units, some of which hosted workshops and production areas, has uncovered different phases of renovation, as is the case of House 1, Regio IV, Insula 2, which went through four phases in the space of a hundred years (Govi and Sassatelli 2010a), illustrating the force of social dynamics *vis-à-vis* the mark of urban permanence and its institutionalisation, which is encapsulated by the naming of the city itself, Etruscan *Kainua*, found inscribed on a bowl at one of the main sanctuaries dedicated to Tinia (Govi and Sassatelli 2010b). While recognising that sites such as Marzabotto offer a unique glimpse into micro-scale change *vis-à-vis* macro-scale transformation, they nevertheless demonstrate

the heuristic potential of an approach that combines, at different analytical scales, the causes and effects of urbanism sited in the dynamics of interdependence, economic production, and exchange and the ideational and ideological statics of it *vis-à-vis* social interaction and disruption.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conclusion: the Mediterranean periphery of urban origins**

In so far as urbanism is concerned, Mediterranean archaeology is today at an interesting junction: no longer concerned with origins, it has been witnessing a growing interest in the consequences of urbanism in all its facets, particularly in regards to the economic systems and exchange networks, which it generated and stimulated, from production and resource exploitation (*e.g.* Biella *et al.* 2017) to redistribution and knowledge transfer, which has notably become a prominent object of study in relation to textile production (Gleba 2008; 2014; Gleba and Marin Aguilera *in press*). Importantly, these consequences were not limited to large urban agglomerations. They were the result of far more complex historical dynamics that go well beyond urbanism: the case of Iberian *oppida* such as La Quéjola and Alt de Benimaquïa and their highly organised wine production from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC testifies to the capitalisation of a colonial-indigenous interface by local communities that transformed the local economy (Celestino Pérez and Blánquez Pérez 2007). In this respect, the case of wine-producing Iberian *oppida* provides a nuanced picture of these consequences, which can be contrasted with global perspectives (Fuller and Stevens 2019).

This kind of research, however, is not carried out to the detriment of questions about the institutions and the political and social practices that made the city. In this respect, scholarship on the Greek world is leading the way partly as a result of the combination of, and fruitful dialogue between, archaeological and historical questions: forthcoming archaeological research, for example, which highlights the primary role of economic networks, preceding political and religious networks, in the making of the Archaic *polis* in the Aegean region (Loy *in press b*) coexists with recent studies of Athenian ideas of citizenship that have moved away from long-standing interpretations that are excessively narrow on their focus upon Aristotelian ideas (Blok 2013; 2017; Stuurman 2019 for a global perspective on citizenship). These recent studies can, in turn, provide much scope for comparison with other examples of participation and community membership elsewhere (*e.g.* at cult sites and *oppida* in Eastern Iberia, Grau Mira 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> Christophersen's (2015) approach towards an urban archaeology of social practice goes along parallel lines in thinking of the dynamics of urbanism

These scholarly developments have gone hand in hand with radically new perspectives on urbanisation north of the Alps; it is perhaps not a coincidence that the proceedings of *Crossing the Alps* have developed beyond the original intentions of the conference organisers. The result, in my view, has been positive in that focusing on urban origins risks pushing us to expand the urban category and thus the urban periphery, rather than debunking the notion of periphery altogether. The conference contributions and proceedings have, by contrast, achieved precisely the latter.

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