Interrogating Urban Armatures in the Cities of Roman Asia Minor

The concept of “urban armatures,” referring to any set of main streets, plazas, and major public buildings linked by means of arches and fountains that connect one end of the city with the other, has been chiefly analyzed in central and western Roman contexts (MacDonald 1982). There is rich potential, however, in the study of its application in the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman world. Beginning in the Augustan period, the ideas put forth by city developers in this region interact with local cultural factors in a unique way. Focusing on the sites of Aphrodisias and Magnesia on the Maeander in western Asia Minor, I shall reconsider the idea of urban armatures in this new framework using three-dimensional computer models to enhance the way questions of urbanization have been examined in the past.

Before MacDonald’s study, the prevailing viewpoint held that Roman city planners in the Republican period and into the Augustan age imitate Greek models based on rigidly orthogonal axes (e.g., Ward-Perkins 1974). In contrast, MacDonald stresses the innovativeness of Roman cities in their organically-generated urban armatures. The prolonged development and additive nature of these urban armatures contrast starkly with customary notions of theoretical city planning. Instead of following a strict gridded plan, this theory demonstrates how a flowing spatial unity pulls strolling pedestrians along from city gates to all-important forum complexes in the city center, easing the transition from one region to the next.

Drawing on the plethora of recent excavation results from well-preserved sites in Asia Minor (Mitchell 2003) and focusing on Aphrodisias and Magnesia on the Maeander, the idea of urban armatures will be applied in an eastern context (cf. Yegül 2000). My innovative methodology takes full advantage of technology. The traditional way of studying and visualizing a city’s urban development uses multiple diagrams denoting public buildings, communal spaces, and residential areas present in a given period (Ratté 2008). Converting these diagrams into digital three-dimensional models transforms conventional analysis in allowing for the visualization of movement through a city—otherwise difficult to investigate by means of two-dimensional maps and drawings (for new research concerning motion through the Roman city, see Laurence 2011). Since MacDonald’s concept of urban armatures involves the idea of motion through the city, my method of applying digital architecture to the study of this concept in the Greek east correlates well with his intended goals. Ultimately, my project will contribute to a greater understanding of the complex ways in which Asia Minor acculturated Roman innovations in urbanism.

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