

## Reconsidering Spatial Consensus and Communal Agency in Late Antique Urbanism

The fourth and fifth centuries CE saw a great proliferation of church foundations following the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313. However, this period was also characterized by far fewer urban foundations compared to the five centuries of Roman settlement that preceded it. Where new cities were founded, they were generally small and lacked the orthogonal planning of their earlier counterparts.

Consequently, some have argued that such changes were governed more by “inertia and practicality” rather than by intentionality; even new buildings in established urban centers showed “a lack of care in their placement compared to early imperial monuments” (Lavan 2003). Likewise, the appropriation or abandonment of religious spaces in certain North African urban centers seems to not have been “strictly connected to explicitly ideological or religious issues” (Leone 2013).” These arguments seem to challenge earlier proposals that changing cultural and religious conditions in Late Antiquity were necessarily and deliberately reflected in urban landscapes, especially in the placement of churches (Krautheimer 1983). Thus, there have been difficulties in reconciling a view of Late Roman civic “decline” with the notion that civic spaces could still be consciously planned and manipulated.

The examinations of several Late Antique sites on the Adriatic coast, in North Africa, and in Asia Minor suggest the deliberate placement of Christian foundations to alter, break, or exploit traditional patterns of movement around them. An analysis of site plans shows the strategic appropriation of thoroughfares and public spaces around gates and markets, with some cases occurring as early as the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Bratož 2010; Chevalier and Matejčić 2004; Humphries 1999). These reflect the newfound importance of the church (both

building and institution) to urban and communal identities in this period; the establishment of a basilica would help distinguish a town or city within the increasingly Christian Roman Empire, especially as a potential host for one of the numerous councils and synods in that period. Furthermore, these churches were often funded by the communities themselves, and served as a common monument to the shared religious identity of the populace. Finally, the maintenance of sanctuaries and temples at certain sites also suggests some agency among non-Christian communities in preserving their own urban spaces. Co-existing pagan and Christian communities manipulated urban landscapes to help resolve social and religious tensions (Sears 2007).

Thus, the Christianization of spaces, the contraction of settlements during the Late Roman Empire, and changing material conditions were not mutually exclusive with expressions of urban intentionality and communal agency. If anything, changing demographic, economic, and cultural circumstances provided opportunities for certain communities to consciously reorient urban settlements around more pertinent material and religious concerns and conditions. As a result, we may depart from the idea that meaningful urban manipulation is expressed primarily through central planning during periods of civic growth and expansion.

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