The reduction of the fortified city area in late antiquity: some reflections on the end of the ‘antique city’ in the lands of the Eastern Roman Empire

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The controversy about the character of the transition between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages goes back quite a long time. Most of the scholars still accept the old idea that the period of late antiquity to the early Middle Ages represents an epoch of decline in the history of European civilisation – an opinion, which has to be attributed to Gibbon’s well known work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. One of the essential points in this debate is the one about the fate of the so-called ‘antique city’. A starting point of the discussion was the publication of the famous work of A. Kazhdan concerning the fate of the Byzantine towns and cities in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, followed by critical remarks of various Russian and European scholars and, first of all, of G. Ostrogorsky. The excellent papers of E. Kirsten and F. Dölger present clear evidence for the growing attention in regarding the problems of late antique and early medieval towns of the Eastern Roman Empire in the decade after the Second World War. Since that time, thousands of articles and dozens of books and anthologies have been published. A recent article contained a detailed list of the most important contributions to the subject.

It is believed that one of the symptoms of the decline of the cities and towns of the later Roman Empire during the transition period and later in the Dark Ages is the reduction of their wall circuits. The adepts on this subject point to various reasons for the decline. According to most of them, the main reason was the irreversible weakening process of the city councils after the fourth century and the crisis of the municipal finances. Furthermore, the cities suffered from barbar-

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1 Kazhdan 1954.
2 For example Siuziumov 1956.
3 Ostrogorsky 1959.
4 Kirsten 1958.
5 Dölger 1961.
6 Lavan 2001a.
ian invasions,⁸ famines and pest epidemics,⁹ together with natural disasters such as earthquakes etc.¹⁰ The effect of all these misfortunes was, according to this point of view, a disastrous financial, cultural and demographic collapse which led to the definitive decline and even to the disappearance of the institution ‘city’ in the territories of the former Roman Empire for more than two or even three hundred years. This ‘catastrophe theory’ was developed in the last decades mostly by scholars such as Wolfgang Müller-Wiener¹¹, Clive Foss¹² and Wolfram Brandes¹³ and was described as ‘a transition from polis to kastron’.¹⁴ Some scholars believe that the new, much shorter walls even represented the actual border of the settlement.¹⁵ In these small fortresses, according to this point of view, a small number of representatives of the civilian, ecclesiastical and military administration took refuge.

In this paper I am not attempting to argue to what extent it is justifiable to use the term decline concerning the development of the cities and towns in this period.¹⁶ Recently this old problem was discussed once more in the Journal of Roman Archaeology¹⁷ and in several volumes of the series ‘The Transformation of the Roman World’.¹⁸ I am simply aiming at getting the answer to one main question: To what extent should the reduction of the fortified area be interpreted as a sign of decline of the Roman cities? To find a solution to this main problem, the following questions have to be answered: Was the entire city area densely populated in classical antiquity? Were the living spaces in Classical and late antiquity one and the same? Did the city walls in late antiquity represent the real settlement borders?

### Question No. 1: Was the entire town area densely populated in classical antiquity?

Situated in the bizarre mountains of South Lycia, the earliest settlement of Arykanda (Fig. 1) was the residence of a local ruler, demonstrated by the keep on the rocks above the small town dated to between the sixth and fourth century BC. The town grew considerably during the last pre-Christian centuries, but remained unfortified. An intensive

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8 Foss 1975.
9 Allen 1979; Leven 1987; Durlat 1989; see also the remarks in Brandes 1999.
10 Mango 1980, 60-87.
14 See Poulter 1996 and Dunn 1994 for the situation on the Balkans.
15 Russel 1958, 7-8, 71-88.
16 I for myself prefer the expression transformation.
building programme was realised in the Roman age (second century AD). As a result, the significantly greater part of the built-up town area was occupied by public buildings.\textsuperscript{19} Residencies were discovered only in the western part, on the steep slopes below the old acropolis.

Similar to Arykanda, the town of Pinara was founded in the sixth century BC. The populated area was extended considerably during the Roman age. A clear subdivision of the town area into private and public areas can be recognised: the palace district, the agora with the adjacent public buildings, the temples north to the palace, a residential district west towards the temples and a necropolis in the south-western parts of the town. In late antiquity, the built-up area was restricted to the borders of the old Lycian town and the fortification of the town was strengthened.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} Knoblauch/Witschel 1993.
\textsuperscript{20} Wurster/Wörrle 1978.
The length of the Hellenistic and Roman age walls of Philippi (Fig. 2) amounted to 3,500 m; the fortified area covering nearly 70 ha. Only the low, flat parts of the town were built-up and populated; the steep slopes of the hill, crowned by the acropolis remained unsettled. In Taracco, about one third of the fortified town area was occupied by a quarter with exclusively public functions, including the so-called ‘cult district’, a representative square and a circus. Numerous buildings with public

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character were situated within the residential district, which occupied the lower parts of the town area.\textsuperscript{22}

The town \textit{Demetrias} (Fig. 3) was founded in 294 BC by Demetrios Poliorketes (the Besieger), who brought together all the neighbouring settlements behind mighty walls; with the area surrounded by the walls originally covering about 440 ha. During

\textsuperscript{22} Panzram 2002, 28-92.
the reign of Antigonos Gonatas, an inner wall was built dividing the fortified area into two sectors. The town itself was situated in the district around the harbour and was surrounded by a wall, whose length amounted to more than 8,000 m. The zones outside the walls of Gonatas (the fertile valley of the river Aligarorema) served as the first line of defence and probably also for agricultural purposes.23

The wall circuit of the ancient town Priene measured about 2,500 m. Inside the wall, several non built-up areas are apparent: the rocky plateau of the acropolis, the terraces below the acropolis and a wide strip along the southern wall.24

It is obvious that the entire town area was not identical with the actually populated area. This assertion can be made by means of some additional cases. For example, the fortification of the city of Antioch illustrates the aspiration of the Hellenistic architects and builders with the erection of majestic walls, surrounding even rocky and uninhabited peaks regardless of the factual requirements for the defence of the city and the extent of the populated area.25 The walls of the city of Athens in classical times were quite impressive as well,26 and the fortified area in Corinth in the pre-Roman age surrounded more than 700 ha. The case of Teltepe (Diana Veteranorum) in North Africa is very instructive. In the beginning, the scholars expected that the populated town area would cover more than 400 or even 500 ha, but later, owing to the weight of the evidence, it had to be reduced to only 50-100 ha.27

Question No. 2: the size of the dwellings space

Roman Volubilis was a successor of an old Phoenician settlement, probably a colony of Carthage. In the so-called ‘north-eastern district’ of the Roman town, altogether 25 dwelling units were excavated. Apart from private rooms, open (i.e. unroofed) and representative rooms, storerooms, workshops, accommodations for guests etc. were found.28 The floorage in Priene (Fig. 4) amounted to an average of 210 sqm; about 75 sqm of which were roofed. The size of the private rooms amounted only to between 25-30 sqm, with the storerooms often being larger.29

The archaeological-ethnographical approach to the analysis of private houses in Pompeii30 illustrates how complicated it is to specify which of the numerous rooms

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26 Thompson et al. 1943.
27 Duncan-Jones 1974, 265, n. 2.
29 Dontas 2000, 178.
30 Allison 1997.
within the wealthy Roman residence had explicit dwelling functions. The problem is connected with the specific role of large Roman houses as a places of public life. On the other hand, it was shown that large areas within the Roman town were covered with public structures such as temples, baths, theatres, market squares, palestrae and stadia. A good model in this respect is Xanthen, where public buildings dominate most of the excavated areas.

This situation will not seem all that strange to us, if we take into account how Roman towns were planned. In his well-known book, the famous Roman architect Vitruvius enacted exact norms for urban planning. First of all, he wrote, the course of the future town wall must be chosen, and in this case the special features of the topography and the surrounding landscape have to be taken into consideration, not the size of the (potentially) populated area. Then, the road network has to be laid out, followed by the choice of the position for the public buildings – forum, temples,
baths etc. Not until these decisions had been made were the dwelling areas plotted out. On the other side, the public areas were jealously guarded by imperial legislation and were not liable to building activities. Attempts at using public spaces for private purposes were to be opportunely neutralised. Although there is evidence that the central government and the local officers tried to enforce these laws as late as in the age of Justinian, the scholars rightfully are in doubt about the use of the efforts undertaken. The archaeological evidence has also shown that a significant change occurred in late antiquity.

The change in late antiquity

In *Heraclea Lyncestis* in the Republic of Macedonia, numerous small-room-houses above and near the ancient theatre were excavated and dated to the sixth century AD. Such small and narrow houses, closely situated to each other were also found in late antique fortified settlements in North Bulgaria, such as Shumen and Golemanovo Kale (Fig. 5).

35 Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Liber I.VII.
37 Claude 1969, 54-55.
38 Confer Milinković in this volume fig. 2.
40 Dintchev 1997a.
At the turn of the fifth to the sixth century, the former public buildings adjacent to the round square in Caričin Grad were divided into numerous small rooms and served as private houses of “newcomers”. All these examples demonstrate that the late antique citizen required considerably less living space than his ancestors in the period of the classical antiquity. In other words, in this period much more people could live within a much smaller area compared to earlier times.

A similar situation was given in Arykanda after 500 AD (Fig. 6). Although the town did not suffer from barbarian invasions, the population of the Roman age-settlement for some reason withdrew to the old Lycian acropolis. However, the so-called Byzantine Lower Town was founded approximately one mile away from the old settlement. There were virtually no public areas and squares in this Lower Town. It was surrounded by mighty walls and obviously densely populated. About thirteen percent of the built-up area was occupied by the bishop’s residence, in addition, some parts of the old populated areas below the acropolis were still occupied – for example some of the baths.

Question No. 3: Did the walls represent the real settlement borders in late antiquity?

A small fortress was erected on the hill Jolkos close to the town Demetrias in the sixth century AD, the areas surrounding the harbour were nevertheless further on populated. Obviously the new fortress only served the inhabitants of Demetrias as a refuge in dangerous times.

Athens (Fig. 7) was originally surrounded by long walls, erected in the fifth century BC, the so-called Themistoclean Walls. During the Roman age, they had considerably fallen into decay. In the middle of the third century AD – during the reign of the Emperor Valerian – the fortified area extended eastward. In 267 AD, Athens became victim of the Herules and their disastrous attack, the citizens were not able to defend their city effectively because of the enormous length of the walls, which did not correspond to the number of the inhabitants. They learnt a lesson and in the last third of the third century AD, the shorter late Roman wall was built. In 395 AD, the Goths under Alaric could not capture the city because of the strength of this new fortification and

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41 Popovič 1982.
42 Knoblauch/Witschel 1993.
44 Thompson/Scranton 1943, 372.
45 Thompson 1959, 61.
46 Frantz 1988, 5-6.
47 Zosimos V, 6.1-2.
were only able to burn parts of the city outside the late Roman walls.48 Excavations of many years’ duration in the area of the ancient (‘Greek’) agora, which lay to the west of the newly fortified area, and in other districts to the east of the late Roman wall had shown traces of active settlement life during the period between the fourth and sixth centuries AD.49

48 Frantz 1988, pp. 52-56
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The giant ancient walls of Corinth (the area surrounded by walls covered about 700 ha) were destroyed after the conquest of the city by Romans in 146 BC. In 396 AD, the city was destroyed by the Goths. According to the contemporary sources, the city was taken easily because of the absence of walls, but even if they had been present, it is questionable to what extent they should have been able to protect the people, as the case of Athens has shown. Immediately after this disaster had occurred, a new, shorter wall was built. The inhabitants overcame the barbarian invasion and its effects relatively quickly and within the newly fortified area new building programmes were realised. In addition, traces of intensive life were detected outside the walls.

The area surrounded by walls in the town Pautalia amounted to about 30 ha. The walls were built during the reign of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Towards the end of the fourth century AD, a hill-fort immediately to the south of the town was built. There is evidence of intensive life within the old town areas in the period between the fourth and the sixth century AD, confirmed by findings and coins. The most recent coin dates

50 Zosimos V, 6.4.
51 Gregory 1979, 269.
to 585 AD.\textsuperscript{53} Also, a partitioning wall was discovered in the lower town, which unfortunately could not be dated precisely. All that is known is that it was erected between the fifth and ninth centuries AD.\textsuperscript{54} According to the latest investigations, in late antiquity the populated areas were located only to its west. In that case, we have to wait for the final evaluation.

The total built-up area of Caričin grad (Fig. 8), identified as Justinian’s foundation \textit{Justiniana Prima}, amounted to almost 8 ha (according to other scholars to more than 10 ha). The town was founded around or after 535 AD, near the birth-place of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Slokoska/Stajkova-Alexandrova/Spassov 2002.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Spassov/Fărkov/Stajkova-Alexandrova 1991.
\end{itemize}
Emperor Justinian, far from the main routes of the region. On the acropolis, the bishop’s residence and the cathedral church were situated, below lay the so-called upper town where various public buildings and squares, churches, a principia and a villa urbana were discovered. The excavations in the areas of the so-called lower town brought to light several public buildings, churches, a reservoir and a small residential district in the south-west corner of the fortress. The suburb was unfortified with the exception of a single fosse. Here numerous houses, workshops and churches were excavated.55

The ancient ruins near the modern village Viranşehir in Turkey (Fig. 9) were identified as the late antique Mokisos which was also founded by Justinian. Its entire populated area amounted to about 50 ha, with a number of more than 1,000 buildings being identified. The town was unfortified with the exception of the small acropolis (120 x 30/50 m) and of the small fort in the central parts of the town (18 x 26 m). The bishop’s residence lay outside these areas, surrounded by walls.56

The late antique town on the hill of Tsarevets (Fig. 10), identified as the late antique bishop’s see Zikideva, could be interpreted as a successor of the Roman town Nicopolis ad Istrum. It flourished in the decades after the end of the late antique settlement next to Roman Nicopolis (dated to around 500 AD). The inhabited area was a densely populated rocky plateau in an outstanding, naturally defendable position. Like as Justiniana Prima, the town at Tsarevets just represents an emblematic example of the late antique town-planning concept on the Balkans. Traces of settlement life were also found on the slopes below the plateau, as well as on the hills in the vicinity of Tsarevets – Trapesitza and Momina krepot/Devin Grad. The settlement at Momina krepot was also fortified. The entire populated area of the agglomeration amounted to almost 30 ha.57

It is obvious that the populated and the fortified areas in the late antique period are not one and the same. A great number of inhabitants lived outside the new, much shorter town walls. Therefore, the reduction of the fortified area was not (in most cases at least) caused by a demographic catastrophe or by an imaginary ‘general decline’ of the institution ‘city’. Despite their shorter walls, the towns and the cities remained in many cases significant centres of their territories and also within the imperial economic and administrative structure. In addition, these new walls were in several cases an insuperable obstacle for the invading barbarians and could guarantee the safety of the citizens.
Fig. 9. Map of Viranşehir/Mokisos
1. Main gate
2. South-East corner of the fortress
3. Cathedral church
4. Monastery
5. Martyry
6. Bishop’s residence
7. Seat of the military commander
8-10. Wealthy private residences
11. Church with a nave and two aisles
12-13. Barracks
14. House of a wealthy town-dweller

Fig. 10: Map of Tsarevets/Zikideva
What made the people in late antiquity reduce the city walls?

In the first three centuries AD, a new religion – Christianity – quickly conquered the hearts and souls of a considerable number of the Roman people. In most towns and cities of the Roman Empire, Christian communities were founded. The Christians could participate relatively easy in the town’s public and economic life (with some exceptions concerning pagan cult practice and especially the cult of the Emperor). In other words, the early Christian was not a revolutionary. He wanted to save his soul and not to change the existing world order.

In the time after the Edict of Milan, things changed drastically. The discontent of the church and its representatives with a number of municipal institutions grew. The devil and his actions could be recognised practically everywhere. One of the most important deeds of the devil were the theatrical performances which were considered ‘immoral’ and a ‘waste of time’. The theatre absorbed large sums of money and the flock was still more attracted to it than to the church. According to the church fathers, gladiatorial contests were cruel, brutal and represented a superfluous pagan tradition; the fathers also condemning fights with wild animals. The public baths were denounced as anti-spiritual – Christians should rather take care of their souls. The agora was also regarded as a pagan place and a place of intercourse with young women.58 In short, the Christian church denounced most of the old city symbols which were the sites of public life; in this way denouncing public life itself. Christians were rather to live within their own family, not in the streets of the city. That is why the physical change of the city during the period of Christianisation is not only connected with the destruction of pagan temples59 and the erection of churches, but with a total transformation of the urban pattern. The victory of Christianity is therefore the main reason for the disappearance of the public aspects in the life of the city and its inhabitants.60

However, the Church cannot take responsibility for the reduction of the town walls. The merit of the Christian religion was to make the people accept the idea of living without public spaces; the immediate reasons being the barbarian invasions and their consequences.

In the course of the period of migration, the inability of the central government to guarantee the security of the frontiers of the empire became more and more evident. The limes was no longer an obstacle for the invading barbarians. 420 AD, the Emperors Honorius and Theodosius permitted the fortification of private estates.61 As a result of this edict, not only a great number of villae were surrounded by walls, but in rural regions numerous fortresses and fortified settlements were erected which had to

60 See an obverse opinion in Brands 2003.
61 Codex Justinianus VIII, 10.10.
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protect the life of the people in the countryside.62 The town inhabitants also had to act on their own account. The central government was unable to station troops in every city and town of the Empire, for which reason only a small number of places had garrisons within their walls. Even in important cities such as Antioch, military units were either not present or inadequately small. In the town Chalkis in Syria, the citizens were forced to hide the soldiers in their houses to protect them from the Persian conquerors.63 In many cases it has been reported that for this reason town militias were founded.64 The participation of civilian citizens in war efforts and the defence of their own towns or cities were a common phenomenon already in the sixth century, wherefore it was recommended by the highest military command.65

However, neither the citizens nor the insufficient military garrisons could successfully defend extremely long wall circuits, leading to the central government’s decision to drastically reduce the size of the enormous walls. Although Procopius tried to convince us of the crucial role played by the Emperor Justinian in this development, his ancestors and successors doubtlessly had a share in these processes. Of course, most of the evidence belongs to Justinian’s age.

Thus, Justinian for example ordered his commander Belisarius to curtail the walls of the towns and fortresses at the North African frontier in case he should find that the hitherto existing walls were too long and could not be defended successfully by their inhabitants. The emperor’s orders were obviously executed immediately: Leptis Magna is a demonstrative case.66 The length of the ramparts of Antioch67 and Caesarea in Kappadokia68 were reduced as well and for the same reasons – too long walls rather represented a risk for the citizens than an obstacle for their enemies. In other words, the reduction of the area surrounded by walls was a preventive measure and did not represent a sign of decline of the cities, but, on the contrary, of their vitality. In many cases, ‘reduction’ was a synonym for ‘survival’. If we must describe the motivation for the reduction with only one word, it would have to be ‘prudence’.

The instructive case of Androna

Not only legislation and other contemporary written sources allow us to understand the motivation of the citizens in late antiquity to reduce the walls of their towns and cities –

62 See for example Popov 1982, and the contribution of M. Milinković in this volume.
63 Procopius, De bello persico II, 12.2.
64 Claude 1969, 130-131.
65 Mauricii Strategicon X.3.
66 Procopius, De aedificiis VI, 4.2-3; Goodchild/Ward-Perkins 1953.
67 Procopius, De aedificiis II, 10.2-5, 9-14.
68 Procopius, De aedificiis V, 4.7-14.
there is archaeological evidence as well. I would like to outline the results of the recent investigations of the ancient town *Androna* in Syria, known today as al-Andarin. The town was surrounded by two (inner and outer) wall circuits. The excavations revealed many superior buildings: public buildings, altogether eleven churches, public baths etc. The prime of the town is dated by ceramic finds to the fifth and sixth centuries. The most significant building within the wall circuits of the town is the so-called *castrum*, a fortress situated almost in the town centre. This is a nearly square building with about 80 m side length, with a small church in the centre of the inner yard. On the gate in the middle of the west side of the *castrum*, an inscription in Greek was found. It reports that a wealthy inhabitant of *Androna*, a certain Thomas, donated this fortress. Construction work began May 558. Inscriptions on the doors of the church in the inner yard mention another person, a certain John, likewise an inhabitant of the town, as donator of the *castrum*. Thus, the town castle was donated by one or more private persons. The most important fact is that they financed the erection of the castle being private persons and citizens, and not by order of the central civil or military government. This was a luxurious refuge in cases of emergency. The case of *Androna* demonstrates once more that every town and every city able to afford it had to take care of its own safety.

Bibliography

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