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# Rosetta

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**Neil Christie and Andrea Augenti (eds), *Vrbes Extinctae: Archaeologies of Abandoned Classical Towns*. Farnham and Burlington, Ashgate, 2012. Pp. xx, 372. \$124.95. ISBN 9780754665625 (Hbk).**

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This edited volume originated in a 2006 Leicester conference that highlighted new research into the latest phases of occupation of Roman towns that failed in, or soon after, late antiquity. It therefore joins the extensive body of recent literature on the archaeology of late and post-Roman urbanism in Europe and the Mediterranean. However, the focus of the collected papers is not so much on the larger economic and political causes of the failure (or transformation) of urbanism at the end of Roman antiquity, as on the site histories of individual ‘extinct cities,’ and on the most effective methods of tracing and understanding processes of urban decay in the archaeological record. Cities that did not long survive the end of antiquity and were not subsequently settled on an urban level are considered here as a unique category of settlement, as ‘vital laboratories of study’ that require different research questions and methodologies than those used for the study of urban ‘survivors.’

In his introductory essay (p. 1-44), Neil Christie outlines the challenges - and the potential value - of studying ‘lost’ cities. He maintains that late and post-Roman urban extinctions were not ‘atypical’ in Italy, citing estimates that as many as half of the Roman urban sites were lost in some regions. He then outlines and analyzes the factors that could contribute to each town’s specific ‘downward urban trajectory:’ namely, warfare, natural events, economic marginalization and loss, and (Roman) state decay. Christie concludes by offering some ‘revisions’ that have been enabled by recent archaeological research in Italy and at other sites around the Mediterranean, emphasizing the potential of ‘integrated’ or ‘multi-method and non-invasive’ techniques -

such as geophysical allied with surface survey - to recover information from 'lost' urban sites more systematically. One possible 'revision,' he notes, may be the re-classification of sites previously considered *urbes extinctae*, since populations continued to utilize many such sites (though often on a sub-urban level) far beyond antiquity.

The rest of the papers mostly focus on the archaeologies of individual cities in their later stages of occupation, beginning with three urban sites in Italy: Classe, Potentia, and Cosa. These case studies highlight the widely variable chronology and character of post-antique occupation and exploration of urban sites even within a single region. Accordingly, the authors (and the projects they describe) utilize a variety of approaches to the material record of each site. Andrea Augenti (p. 45-75) discusses the ongoing multinational program of research at Classe - the 'lost' port city of the late imperial capital of Ravenna - that motivated the original Leicester conference. This research, which combines targeted excavation with more recent forays into geophysical survey, has distinguished late and post-antique phases of settlement in the area of the port and around the city's main church complexes. Frank Vermeulen (p. 77-95) provides a brief account of current research at a substantially older city, the Republican colony of Potentia on the central Adriatic coast. Here, intra-site topographical research incorporating aerial photography, grid-based artifact collection, and geophysical survey, coupled with the reanalysis of older excavation data and limited new excavation, has produced a detailed urban plan, as well as new information on the town's development in the second century BC through its disappearance in the sixth century AD. Then Enrico Cirelli and Elizabeth Fentress describe the post-urban occupation of the Republican colony of Cosa on the South Etrurian coast, where – in contrast with most of the other sites considered in the volume – urban life did not extend past the Roman imperial period (p. 97-113). Their assertion that nucleated settlement on the site of the Byzantine citadel dates to the tenth century at the earliest, rather than to the seventh century, highlights the difficulties of establishing firm chronologies for the archaeologically ephemeral later phases of occupation in 'extinct' cities.

Most of the remaining papers focus on sites in the Mediterranean core of the Roman (or Byzantine) empire – though, like the Italian case studies, these sites vary widely in their late antique occupation histories and in the extent and nature of the archaeological research now taking place in them. Miguel Ángel Cau outlines the current state of research on the late antique cityscapes of the Balearics, where extensive excavation has only been possible in one Roman urban center, Pollentia on Mallorca (p. 115-144). On the Iberian mainland, Isabel Velázquez and Gisela Ripoll summarize the results of excavations at the likely site of Recopolis, a late-sixth century Visigothic royal foundation (p. 145-175).

In the next paper (p. 177-205), Gareth Sears and co-authors outline the results of recently initiated fieldwork at the long-lived city of Cyrene in eastern Libya. They emphasize the value (and necessity) of employing non-invasive research techniques like magnetometry on large and vulnerable sites like Cyrene, in order to gain a fuller picture of the extent and nature of urban structures without privileging more ‘monumental’ periods (e.g. Greek and Roman) over other phases of occupation (e.g. late antiquity). In contrast, William Bowden and Richard Hodges, in their summary of the results of fieldwork now in its second decade at Butrint in Albania, argue that dramatic changes in settlement on the site in the seventh through tenth centuries - long after it ceased to be a recognizably Roman city - could not have been recognized without extensive excavation (p. 207-241).

The next two papers discuss urban structures and materials that were recovered on Eastern Mediterranean sites using traditional excavation techniques. Rebecca Sweetman attempts to recover the post-classical histories of the well-known ancient cities of Knossos and Sparta, claiming that earlier, misleadingly negative interpretations of the evidence for late antique occupation were conditioned by the biases of excavators and by the challenges imposed by the modern topography of the sites themselves (p. 243-273). Paul Arthur summarizes the less-problematic evidence for the lengthy post-Roman occupation of the large (but now largely empty) site of Phrygian

Hierapolis, which has been subject to regular systematic excavation for much of the past half-century (p. 275-305).

The last two papers concern sites at the geographical extremes of the Roman world. J.A. Baird re-examines the evidence from early twentieth century excavations at Dura Europos in the Syrian steppe, arguing that Dura 'died a complex and prolonged death' that included the 'variable abandonment' of the site by military and non-military communities, rather than being hastily abandoned immediately after the Sassanian conquest of AD 256 (p. 307-329). Finally, Michael Fulford discusses another well-known 'abandoned' city at the opposite end of the Roman empire – Silchester in *Britannia* – that was also subject to extensive clearance excavation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 331-351). While acknowledging the evidence for continued occupation on the site after the collapse of Roman power in Britain in the early fifth century – much of which has come from recent excavations - Fulford attributes Silchester's final abandonment to the political reconfigurations that accompanied the formation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the region.

The volume as a whole offers wide geographical (if not chronological) coverage, and serves as a useful summary of recent archaeological research on late antique urban landscapes. All of the papers are clearly written and well-illustrated with maps, plans, and photographs, including in a section of colour plates. However, the papers vary widely in their scope, and in the extent to which they address new research methodologies and broader theoretical frameworks for understanding urban change in the *longue durée*. Some authors (e.g. Cau on the Balearic islands) simply summarize the current state of research in a particular region or city; others (e.g. Bowden and Hodges on Butrint) more explicitly tie their research into current debates on settlement change in the late- and post-antique Mediterranean. And despite the wide geographical coverage of the volume, little effort is made in the main text or in the introductory and concluding chapters to draw parallels or distinctions between the individual case studies. The broader questions raised by many of the papers demand a more extensive synthesis than Augenti's short concluding remarks (p. 353-357). For example, how did

processes of urban abandonment differ across time periods and geographic regions? Although many of the authors profess a desire to move away from conventional narratives of the 'decline and fall' of the ancient city, few question the validity of framing urban change in 'biological' terms and characterizing cities as entities that were born, experienced a 'prime of life,' and died. Furthermore, the choice of case studies reinforces the traditional narrative of the Roman imperial period as a 'golden age' for cities, with late antiquity and the early middle ages representing their 'afterlife:' only one of the cities discussed was founded after late antiquity (Recopolis), and only two 'perished' before the close of the Roman imperial period (Cosa and Dura Europos). But these examples show that cities could have different 'life cycles,' prompting the further question of the relative impact of local and empire-wide processes (such as environmental, economic, and political change) on the pace and nature of urban abandonment during - as well as after - classical antiquity.