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Carolyn S. Snively

## THE FATES OF BALKAN CITIES IN LATE ANTIQUITY: RECENT VIEWS<sup>1</sup>

Although the Roman and Late Antique economy was based on agriculture, and the majority of the population lived in the country rather than in towns and cities, urban life with its amenities was considered desirable, perhaps even ideal and “man’s natural destiny.” In fact, a certain tension is visible in Roman literature between the urge to retire to the country or at least to relax in one’s distant villa and the need to return to the city where everything was happening.

Urbanism followed conquest, as the Romans established towns in newly conquered areas where towns and cities had not previously existed; urban settlements served as the focus of government within provinces. In parts of the empire where cities were prevalent before the Roman conquest, they were gradually transformed under Roman rule. Thus within the Balkan Peninsula or, more narrowly, even within the Prefecture of Eastern Illyricum, there existed a network of hundreds of towns and cities, each with its own unique location, population, ground plan, architecture, history, traditions, and reasons for prosperity or poverty.

One of the exciting goals of archaeology is the detailed working out of the history of a particular city and how it changed and developed during its lifetime. In particular, in recent decades as Late Antique urbanism has become a hot topic, so to speak, much attention has been focused on the gradual metamorphosis of the Roman city with its forum, public baths, colonnaded streets, temples, theater, and perhaps circus and amphitheater, into a Late Antique city whose most visible structures were usually palatial residences and churches.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I express my thanks to the organizers of the Niš and Byzantium Symposium for the invitation to participate in the 2008 meeting and for their warm hospitality and to Gettysburg College for its support of my research through Research and Professional Development grants. I also wish to thank Andrew Carlson, whose senior capstone paper for the Department of Classics at Gettysburg College provided a summary of the evidence for planned refortification of the cities of the empire.

<sup>2</sup> For the most obvious and accessible examples of this process in regard to Naissus, see Jeremić, Gordana, “Mosaics of the Structure with Octagon, from the Ancient Naissus,” *Niš & Byzantium* V (2007) 87-97; Jovanović, Aleksandar, “Archeological notes from late antique Naisa and surrounding,” *Niš & Byzantium* I (2003) 23-38; Ljubomirović, Irena, “Naissus in a New Province between the East and the West,” *Niš & Byzantium* III (2005) 87-102;

The tentative conclusions of a decade or two ago have now become accepted fact.<sup>3</sup> Major changes during the Late Antique period include the abandonment of temples, of many theaters, and of some baths. Sometimes an existing structure was taken over for another function; sometimes the structure was dismantled in order to re-use the building materials; frequently the location, i.e., the real estate, was purchased or appropriated for a new building or other use. The distinction between public and private spaces was blurred; for example, private buildings might encroach on colonnaded sidewalks or even on the streets themselves.

On the other hand, the basic street grid was often maintained, aqueducts continued to function into the 5<sup>th</sup> century or even later, and graves remained for the most part outside the city.<sup>4</sup> The beginnings of intramural burial are fascinating, especially when one considers the long Greek and Roman tradition of exclusion of burials from cities, with certain rare exceptions.

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Maksimović, Marica, "Finds in the site of 'The Minor Cathedral' in Niš," *Niš & Byzantium* II (2004) 197-215; Milošević, Gordana, "The martyry and the cemetery basilica in Jagodin Mala in Niš," *Niš & Byzantium* II (2004) 121-140; Milošević, Gordana, "The 'Italian Plan' of Niš from 1719 as the Motive for Reconstructing the Outlook of the Medieval and Ancient Town," *Niš & Byzantium* III (2005) 149-162; Rakocija, Miša, "Paleobyzantine Churches of Niš: Preliminary Survey," *Niš & Byzantium* V (2007) 125-147; Rakocija, Miša, "New Insight into the Early Christian Past of Niš," *Niš & Byzantium* VI (2008) 45-58.

More generally for the Balkans, see for example Saradi-Mendelovici, Helen, "The demise of the ancient city and the emergence of the medieval city in the Eastern Roman Empire," *Echos du Monde Classique* 32 (1988) 365-401; the articles by Dagron, Kondić, Bavant, Wiseman, Spieser, and Sodini in *Villes et peuplement dans l'Illyricum protobyzantin*, Rome, Coll. Ecole Française de Rome 77, 1984; the articles by Bowden, Crow, Provost, and Karagiorgou in *Recent Research in late-antique urbanism*, L. Lavan, ed., *JRA Suppl. Ser. 42*, 2001; Dunn, Archibald, "The transition from polis to kastron in the Balkans, II-VI centuries: general and regional perspectives," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 18 (1994) 60-80. The general bibliography on the Late Antique city has become quite large, and many studies on individual cities now exist. Luke Lavan provides a useful bibliographic essay in *Recent Research* (op. cit.). The volume entitled *The Transition to Late Antiquity on the Danube and Beyond*, A. G. Poulter, ed., Proceedings of the British Academy 141, Oxford University Press, 2007, focuses on the lower Danube region but also includes more general articles about fortifications and settlements with extensive bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sodini, Jean-Pierre, "The Transformation of Cities in Late Antiquity within the Provinces of Macedonia and Epirus," in *The Transition to Late Antiquity* (note 2 above).

<sup>4</sup> As I point out elsewhere (Snively, C. S., "Intramural Burial in the Cities of the Late Antique Diocese of Macedonia," *Acta XIII Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae, Split - Porec, 1994 = Radovi XIII. Medjunarodnog Kongresa za Starokršćansku Arheologiju*, II, Rome and Split, 1998, 491-498), when burials begin to creep into the city, they tend to fall into certain categories. Clergypersons, usually bishops but occasionally other members of the clergy, are buried within churches. Isolated burials or small cemeteries may appear in parts of the city that are no longer considered urban by the residents; abandoned buildings or uninhabited sections of a town gradually became accepted spaces for burial. Changing the shape and size of a city by the construction of new fortification walls may or may not change the views of the residents about appropriate places for graves. The barbarian invasions would have provided an urgent practical impetus for intramural burial at certain times, but what effect they had on beliefs remains uncertain.

Although we state casually that theaters and temples went out of use, and the function of the forum changed, we sometimes forget the simultaneous change from a very public Roman lifestyle to a much more private one in Late Antiquity. Activities in a Roman city had taken place in a series of public spaces. For example, political and commercial activities occurred in the forum or the agora. Theaters were used for public meetings as well as a variety of entertainments attended by as many of the residents as could get in to enjoy the show. While circuses and amphitheaters provided public gathering places in the cities where they existed, in many cities the theater was the focus of entertainment as well as the venue for public meetings. Large numbers of people gathered at the baths, not only for the sake of cleanliness but also for recreation, business, social and leisure activities. The ceremonies, processions, and sacrifices associated with most forms of state or civic religion took place in public. Some of the more personal cults, the so-called mystery religions, held secret ceremonies and initiation rites; nevertheless it is clear, from the account of the procession in honor of Isis in Apuleius' Roman novel known as the Golden Ass,<sup>5</sup> for example, that even those religions also had visible public activities, probably for the purpose of encouraging more people to join. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, however, most of these public spectacles and activities had come to an end. What happens to fora is unclear and appears to vary from city to city,<sup>6</sup> but theaters and other places of entertainment were closed, the sacrifices and other ceremonies associated with temples had ceased and the temples themselves were closed, some baths continued to function, and new ones were constructed, but on a smaller scale and with a greater degree of privacy for the bathers.<sup>7</sup> The patterns of daily life within a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century city, i.e., where people went and what they did, differed significantly from those of the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, by the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, new patterns of activity began to develop around the Christian churches.

The decision to fortify the cities of the empire rather than to depend on frontier fortifications and the Roman legions had dramatic consequences for those cities. During the period of the Pax Romana city walls had become rather rare; except in newly conquered provinces, they served more as an indication of status than the need for defense.<sup>8</sup> After the barbarian incursions of the third quarter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, however, fortifications were gradually rebuilt or, in some instances, newly created for unwalled towns; some cities ceased to exist.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, Book 11, 8-17.

<sup>6</sup> The fate of the forum, whether abandoned or taking on new roles, deserves a study of its own.

<sup>7</sup> The changes in baths and bathing practices in Late Antiquity is another fascinating topic that awaits elucidation through a detailed study.

<sup>8</sup> The arguments about the city walls of Nikopolis in Epirus provide a case in point; were the Augustan defenses functional or merely decorative? See the references cited in note 11 below.

<sup>9</sup> Styberra at the village of Čepigovo near Prilep, for example.

The size of urban communities is closely related to the issue of fortification.<sup>10</sup> The reason why a number of cities shrank significantly in size in Late Antiquity has both a very narrow and specific answer, i.e., that it was no longer possible to defend a longer circuit of walls, and a series of more complicated answers. The decision to defend the empire by fortifying cities rather than by depending on the army was a deliberate one, and a change in long-standing Roman policy; certainly the decision was influenced by waves of barbarian invasion and was connected with changes in the composition and tactics of the army in Late Antiquity. Nevertheless, only a detailed study of the cities that were significantly reduced in size by the construction of new fortification walls, for example, Nikopolis in Epirus, Byllis, Stobi, Amphipolis, etc., will allow the identification of specific reasons for the reduced size of each city and show whether there was an imperial policy or only ad hoc reasons for each occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the study of the transformation of Greco-Roman cities into Late Antique ones, e.g., by the closing, demolition, transformation, and construction of buildings and the consequent changes in patterns of traffic and behavior, more general theories about the experiences and fates of cities have been proposed.

Will Bowden, in his book about Late Antiquity in the province of Epirus Vetus,<sup>12</sup> argues that in the province of Epirus Vetus public building by local civic officials came to an end during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. For the next two centuries, money was spent primarily on residences, either palatial residences within the cities or villas in the countryside. The middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century marked a change, as the construction of luxurious houses stopped, cities were fortified or refortified during the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Nikopolis shrank in size, and a wave of church building began ca. 470. At the same time, however, as the construction of massive city walls and an amazing number of Christian churches, evidence appears for small and modest housing in the cities. The large residences are subdivided, often used for purposes other than habitation, and small, one or two room houses, the „squalid huts and hovels“ built of re-used materials, appear.

What Bowden proposes for the dating of church construction is of particular interest, because it matches to a considerable extent what is known

<sup>10</sup> Mikulčić, Ivan, „Über die Grösse der spätantiken Städte in Makedonian,“ *Živa Antika* 24 (1974) 191-212.

<sup>11</sup> For Nikopolis in Epirus and its Late Antique fortification wall, see the articles by Bowden, Zachos (Η Οχύρωση), Kefallonitou, and Snively in *Nicopolis B: Proceedings of the Second International Nicopolis Symposium*, Preveza (Greece) 2007. The latest word but certainly not the final one about the shrinkage of cities is that of Kirilov, C., „The Reduction of the Fortified City Area in Late Antiquity,“ in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, Joachim Henning, ed., Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 2007, II, 3-24. Kirilov assumes, on the basis of Procopius' accounts of the rebuilding of Antioch, Caesarea in Cappadocia, and Leptis Magna (*De aedificiis* II, 10, 2-5; V, 4, 7-14; VI, 4, 2-3), that a decision was made by the central government to rebuild cities on a smaller scale.

<sup>12</sup> Bowden, W., *Epirus Vetus: the Archaeology of a Late Antique Province*, Duckworth, London, 2003.

about the period of church building in the adjacent province(s) of Macedonia. Bowden finds little evidence for churches constructed before the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century in Epirus, and the great majority were built between ca. 470 and 550, that is, during the last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In the province(s) of Macedonia, there is evidence for a first wave of church construction ca. 400 but, similar to the situation in Epirus, most of the churches were built in the late 5<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bowden goes on to argue that the economy, exhausted by all this ecclesiastical construction as well as by plague, barbarian invasions, and earthquakes, was not able to sustain continued expenditure, and the construction of churches ceased.

Whether or not one accepts Bowden's model for the Late Antique city as seen in Epirus, anyone who does research on Late Antique urbanism in the Balkans will need to be aware of his hypotheses and to respond to them.

Another recently proposed model comes from a different region of the Balkan peninsula, that of the lower Danube. Andrew Poulter and his British and Bulgarian colleagues have worked at and around Nicopolis ad Istrum since the 1980s. The city was established in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century with all the usual amenities described above as typical for a Roman town. Members of the local elite built residences within the town and villas in the surrounding area; their wealth was based on agriculture. The city survived the political chaos of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and prospered in the 4<sup>th</sup> century until the settlement of barbarian Goths in the area in the last quarter of that century, after the catastrophic battle of Adrianople (378AD). The villas around Nikopolis were looted and burned, the agricultural basis of its prosperity disappeared, and the city itself was destroyed. Soon after 450 Nikopolis was rebuilt, on a new site next to the old city. The settlement was much smaller than the previous one; its massive fortification wall protected churches and military structures. There was no street plan and little evidence for a civilian population, which apparently lived in small houses in the ruins of the older city. This is the model for Late Antique urbanism proposed by Andrew Poulter and his colleagues.<sup>13</sup>

Archibald Dunn, who has published extensively on the "transition from polis to kastron," points out the importance of using textual, epigraphical, archaeological and topographical evidence, in a brief discussion of transitions in southeast Macedonia.<sup>14</sup> In that region, approximately half of the cities described as poleis in the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century, before the Herulian invasion, had lost that civic status by the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, according to the listing compiled by Hierokles. A number of such cities located in valleys and plains ceased to exist at their lowland sites; their populations moved to the uplands and to smaller but more defensible sites. Several cities that continued to exist were located on or near the Via Egnatia, which became a focus of new fortifications, including the mutationes or mansiones of the cursus publicus.

<sup>13</sup> A. G. Poulter provides the most recent bibliography for the site of Nicopolis ad Istrum in his articles in *The Transition to Late Antiquity on the Danube and Beyond* (note 2 above); the book includes several other articles on the site and region.

<sup>14</sup> Dunn, Archibald, "Stages in the Transition from the Late Antique to the Middle Byzantine Urban Centre in S. Macedonia and S. Thrace," in *Αφιέρωμα στον Ν. Γ. Λ. Hammond*, Thessaloniki, 1997, 137-150; and the article by Dunn cited in note 2 above.

The old Greco-Roman cities that survived were heavily fortified along with other types of settlements that acquired important military or administrative functions in the system established by Diocletian and Constantine. Earlier distinctions between settlements were lost, as fortified ones took on the *kastron* function and were referred to indiscriminately by Procopius as *phouria* or castles.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century several new *poleis* appear, usually bishoprics with magnificent episcopal complexes. The church took over various civic functions. The presence or absence of clergy, landowners, garrisons, and imperial officials determined the status of fortified settlements which, as a group, were distinguished from undefended rural communities. By the second half of the century, however, pauperization of material culture and urban life becomes visible. The abandonment of almost all settlements, with the exception in southeast Macedonia of Philippi and Thessaloniki, occurred around the second decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Dunn argues that this phenomenon reflects the disintegration of the political, administrative, and military framework that had sustained the range of Late Antique settlements since the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Various other models have been proposed, to illustrate and explain the history of urbanism in Late Antiquity in the Balkan peninsula, but those of Bowden, Poulter, and Dunn are recent and intriguing, and they seek both to utilize and to explain a range of evidence gathered from excavation and survey as well as texts. These are models based on experience in a particular region, for example, the lower Danube frontier, and relevant for the region discussed; how widely such a regional model can be applied is the question that must be asked of each one. Models are useful because they provide an outline or a framework, with which we can then compare other cities and regions and consider whether they fit the models or not or—the usual situation—fit in some ways but not in others.

Other questions and approaches may provide useful information and conclusions about Late Antique urbanism. Of the two questions below, the first one may shed some light on the elusive definition of Late Antiquity and why that definition is so difficult.

1) When does Late Antiquity begin, as far as cities are concerned, or, when might Late Antiquity be said to begin in a particular city? It may sound as though this question is backward, but an example will illustrate the question. The Herulians captured and sacked the city of Athens in 267; many buildings were destroyed and never rebuilt, the Agora ceased to function, and within a few decades a new fortification wall was built that surrounded a very limited area around the acropolis and Roman city center. Thus one might argue that Late Antiquity began in Athens already in the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century<sup>15</sup> and that the architectural changes characteristic of Late Antiquity do not appear at the same time in all cities even of a single region.

2) What are the reasons for the establishment of new settlements in Late Antiquity and for major deliberate changes to existing cities? The emperors

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<sup>15</sup> It should perhaps also be noted that Aurelian built a new wall around Rome during the 270s.

were responsible for a number of original foundations and major additions to cities around the empire. This is not a new phenomenon, since emperors had frequently founded cities for a variety of purposes but, beginning with the Tetrarchy, tetrarchic capitals and other cities—like York—were profoundly affected by the presence of the emperors. In the Balkans, Thessaloniki, Gamzigrad, Split, and later Justiniana Prima provide examples of cities founded or significantly altered by imperial presence or influence. Naturally Naissus benefitted from having been the birthplace of Constantine.

Many of the new or renovated fortifications of the emperor Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> century certainly fall into the category of towns or cities directly affected by imperial interventions, despite the difficulties presented by Procopius' listings and descriptions of those settlements and by the probability that some part of the refortification of the empire had already been carried out by earlier emperors. A recent study of "Justinianic new-towns", i.e., ones built de novo or thoroughly rebuilt in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that ca. 30 such cities could be included in the category. But the detailed analysis of four such settlements, Justiniana Prima among them, concludes that they were small, Christian, fortified, and the product of direct imperial initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

Another reason for the establishment or support of an existing settlement had to do with natural resources, for example a town located near an important quarry; it would have housed the workers and administrative officials involved with such imperial resources. This reason for the establishment of a city has become especially relevant, with the realization that the site of Golemo Gradište at Konjuh in the province of Dardania, where excavations have been carried out for a decade now, probably controlled the mining of iron ore nearby.<sup>17</sup> The development of the region in Late Antiquity, the increased importance of the road through the Kriva valley, the series of fortresses overlooking that road, and the construction of the city at Golemo Gradište in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and strengthening of its defenses in the 6<sup>th</sup> century—all these developments in eastern Dardania probably reflect the increased importance of the mineral resources in that region and the need for their protection, at a time when other mining regions in the Balkans had been lost.

Many other approaches to Late Antique urbanism could be proposed, have been proposed, and will be proposed. Quantities of information are now available for individual towns and cities, for chronological changes, for regional and provincial patterns, for possible models. It should be possible to reach new and exciting conclusions about Late Antique urbanism in the Balkan peninsula and to make additional contributions to the understanding of cities in the wider Mediterranean world.

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<sup>16</sup> Zanini, Enrico, "The Urban Ideal and Urban Planning in Byzantine New Cities of the Sixth Century AD," in *Theory and Practice in Late Antique Archaeology*, L. Lavan and W. Bowden, eds., Brill (2003) 196-223.

<sup>17</sup> Snively, C. S., "Golemo Gradište at Konjuh, Republic of Macedonia: Prolegomena to the Study of a Late Antique Fortification," *Niš and Byzantium IV* (2006) 229-244; Snively, C. S., "Archaeological Excavations on the Acropolis of Golemo Gradište, Konjuh, Kratovo," *Macedoniae Acta Archaeologica* 18 (2008)335-351.

Каролин С. Снајвли

СУДБИНА БАЛКАНСКИХ ГРАДОВА У КАСНО-АНТИЧКОМ ПЕРИОДУ:  
НОВИЈИ ОСВРТ

Град у касно-античком периоду може се посматрати као потомак и наследник грчко-римског града. Истовремено, он је често задржавао трагове локалне традиције, ни грчке, ни римске, и, очигледно је био обликован према политичким, економским и религиозним кретањима тога времена. Многа градска насеља постепено су се мењала зависно од новонасталих ситуација, нпр. изградња или поправка зидина утврђења, услед престанка функционисања храмова и позоришта, места на којима су се налазила и грађевински материјал поново су коришћени у друге сврхе, а хришћанске цркве грађене су и унутар и околу града. У касно-античком периоду саграђено је неколико нових градова, од којих је најбољи пример Царичин Град, вероватно Јустинијана Прима; други градови претрпели су разарање или су били напуштени, што је резултирало тиме да су обнављани по новом грађевинском плану, нпр. Никополис ад Иструм; а од времена до времена, град би био пресељен на бољу одбрамбену локацију, нпр. Баргала.

У новије време, предложено је више модела за касно-антички град, нпр. Вилијам Боуден нуди серију хипотеза у својој књизи о провинцији Епирус Ветус, а Ендрју Поултер разматра ситуацију у доњем Подунављу на основу својих истраживања у Никополис ад Иструм и његовој околини. Иван Микулчић у неколико својих радова разматрао је касно-римске и рано-византијске градове у Републици Македонији. Интересантно питање и оно које ће се истражити у овом раду је интеракција обимнијих урбаних трендова, на Балкану или чак у целој источној империји, са историјом мањих области или провинција попут Мезије Инфериор, Епирус Ветус и Македоније. Посебна пажња биће посвећена изградњи или реконструкцији зидина утврђења и дужини њихових кругова и величини града које су опасивали у касно-античко доба, као и новом унутрашњем уређењу пронађеном у неким градовима.