Semi-urban or Semi-rural Settlements:
A New Definition of Urban Centres Required?

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The paper takes the move from a comparative analysis carried out for the doctoral thesis on a series of rural settlements in the ancient Roman provinces of Palestine, Arabia and Syria, occupied at least from the 1st to the 7th century CE. One problem was indeed to establish a coherent definition for these settlements, exclusively based on their material evidence.

The terminology used to define settlements is not a simple issue, but is also far from being a purely theoretical interest. In fact, terms archaeologists employ do not only affect the understanding of the scientific data but could possibly lead to misleading final interpretations. One should distinguish two orders of problems: the first connected with the differences between modern languages[1] in use in the scholarly production and terminology offered by ancient sources; the second depending directly on the nature of the settlements. Changes in the meaning of each word occurred through time and consistent differences are noticeable in different geographical contexts. These differences can be partially explained by a different local settlement history and the copresence of parallel linguistic and cultural systems.

Terminology appears to be set on a clear contraposition between urban centres and their countryside, characterised by what is generically described in modern scientific literature as "villages". One could think that the difference between cities and rural settlements might be marked in the terminology as well as in their morphology, but material remains show a more complex reality, due to the variety of rural settlements and their diachronic development. In many cases the label "rural" appears insufficient and limitative. To a certain extent, this variety is also rendered by the multiple designations offered by the historical sources for the rural contexts (like the Greek terms *kome* and *polichne*). If one possible explanation can be a legal and fiscal differentiation among the settlements, what is still arguable is whether such diversity in status is reflected in the morphology of the settlement too.

The major challenge ahead is to describe and identify settlements belonging to an intermediate level, a blurry semi-urban or semi-rural dimension, characterised by settlements defined by Avni as "urban hubs" in the countryside.[2] If the difference between a city, or a *polis*, and a village is conceptually clear and easily understandable through the material remains, how is one to distinguish such "towns" from a large village exclusively on the basis of the material remains? How to differentiate a town from a *polis*, functionally and morphologically? Safrai suggests that the difference between a *polis* and a town is to be seen differently "in size, in economic level and in architecture, in their ethno-demographic stratification and, particularly, in the degree of

Fig. 1: Aerial photography of the site of Hisban/Esbus.

Hellenisation, or the degree of openness to the Graeco-Roman culture and integration in the life of the Hellenised elite in the eastern empire", even if he admits that the distinction is not always clearly visible.[3] Similarly, Avni underlines the importance of the diachronic perspective when distinguishing settlement types, since the Byzantine period represents a period of widespread and radical changes in the settlement pattern in the area.[4]

Functionally and morphologically, cities and towns appear to overlap to a certain extent, the difference being purely ideological: this level is sometimes more difficult to grasp and more subject to diachronic changes.[5] For instance, the recent development of the term "city" shows a substantial dualism in its use:[6] On the one side, the official designation as a city; on the other side, the common one. If the latter considers the dimension as the defining criteria for a city, the former reflects a more
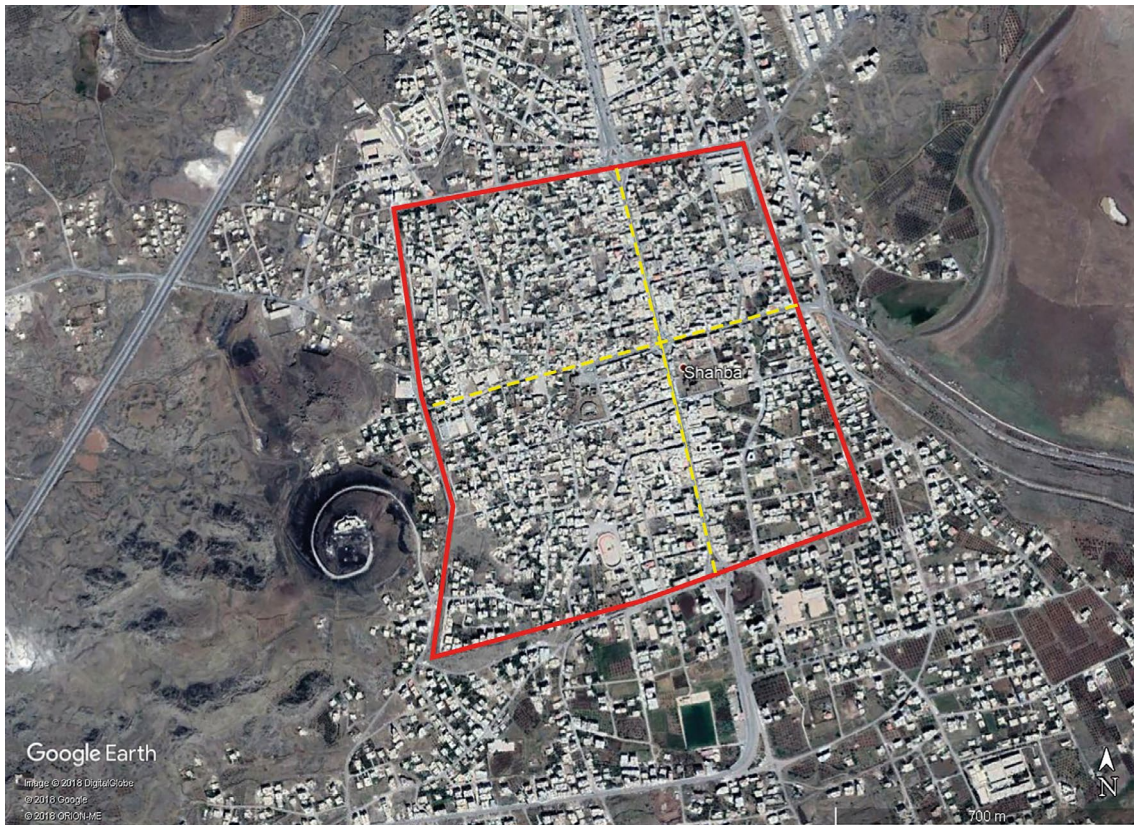
Fig. 2: Satellite image of the site of Shahba/Philippopolis.

complex context that underwent consistent usage shifts, where the defining criteria (for instance, the presence of a bishop or large industrial districts in the European context) are never systematically established and have constantly changed through time and space.[7]

During Roman times, the identification of the proper urban centres (*poleis* and *metropoleis*) in both the administrative and common terminology seems less problematic, in light of the correspondence between the physical features (size of the settlement and its population, geometrical planning of the urban space, public infrastructures and facilities, administrative buildings, major religious complexes and commercial and recreational areas) and predominant political, economic and civic roles. Moreover, the legal recognition ensured by the emperor is also essential.

In the late Roman and Byzantine periods, however, the situation became more complicated, due to the radical transformation in the physical aspects and in the functional features of the cities (such as the encroachment phenomenon and development of urban industrial districts).[8] Moreover, cases of 'promotion' of earlier villages to the urban rank are well attested, for instance Esbus (fig. 1),[9] originating an extremely complex context to render. Although fulfilling political and administrative

requirements, these new *poleis* often differentiate themselves quite clearly from the traditional 'Hellenistic' morphology, generating difficulties in their identification as proper urban centres. Only in few circumstances, as for Philippopolis (fig. 2), the new 'rank' is followed by a complete 'upgrade' of the settlement's features.[10]

The fact that a "town" has specific urban features is the major reason of such confusion. Its definition is often fluctuating, constantly escaping standardisation. It is normally considered in between the city and the village, and it clearly implies a physical and social separation between its urban space and the surrounding countryside.[11] Be that as it may, once a researcher tries to isolate a set of features to define a town, he or she is at odds, because the designation of a town is highly dependent on how each society perceives the settlement's importance.[12] On a general level, one can affirm that a settlement can be defined as a town when it presents socially and physically proper urban features, such as determined economic, religious and political services (i.e. a communal church, market areas, barracks, administrative buildings) and socio-economic stratification, but still lacks a political and legal acknowledgment as an urban community.

It cannot be known for certain whether the ancients thought similarly about these terms and concepts as today. Nonetheless, when considering the sources available, one could quite confidently notice the same blurriness of definition of settlement types, on each level of village, town and city. Furthermore, it is complicated to reconstruct the changes that the terms may have undergone over several centuries, especially in light of the many different languages spoken in the Roman and late antique Near East.[13] To further complicate matters, written sources (especially Byzantine) present different hierarchies of settlements and more often mention the same centre in different ways, in particular in the case of settlements that can be defined as small cities or towns (or even as a large village) for which one can find indiscriminately different terms.[14]

Despite the general lack of an official label to define the semi-urban or semi-rural level, one exception can be represented by the *metrokomia*. Sartre analysed all the evidence coming from the available epigraphic finds from southern Syria and three constitutions from the 5th century.[15] The resulting pattern is far from clear, since the use of the term in the two different sources can refer to extremely different contexts, both chronologically and geographically. The inscriptions do reflect in fact an extremely limited administrative environment, namely in today's central Hauran, for the 2nd and 3rd (and perhaps the 4th) century, where the *metrokomiai* would have functioned as a sort of surrogate for the *polis* in land owned directly by the emperor. The justification is fairly simple: "the imperial treasury need not to be deprived of the income anticipated from these regions",[16] that nonetheless needed some urban settlement to be administrated. Fiscally the *polis* was not a solution, and functionally a simple *kome* was not sufficient to meet the administrative and strategic requirements: an intermediate level (the *metrokomiai*) fulfilled this need,

Fig. 3: The northern part of Shivta, showing possible signs of small-scale planning.

but remained an isolated and regional pattern. The use of the term *metrokomiai* is clearly different in some Egyptian papyri and legal texts,[17] where it reflects an unofficial terminology attested in Egypt in the 4th and 5th century and distinguishes a type of *komai* ruled according to the public law from privately owned *epoikia* – another term normally translated as "villages".[18]

The continuity into the early Islamic period is reflected in many sites of the Near East and also by the Arabic terminology, that follows the same clear distinction between properly urban and rural contexts[19] but maintains the intermediate grey area. The situation is complicated for the earliest phases of the Islamic period, since no direct source is available, apart from some references in the Quran. Only from the 10th century onwards a more clear hierarchy of settlements was defined and four ranks were established among the urban settlements: *amsar*, capitals of regions; *qasabat*, district capital; *madina*, a city of "considerable size"; finally, "towns of various sizes with urban characteristics", for which several terms are employed, but whose physical features are

Fig. 4: Comparison of the size of the settlements considered in the study.

not always clearly distinguishable.[20] Of particular interest is the term *qarya*, the only one showing a radical change in meaning: in the Quran, in fact, it refers to cities, while in its later use it clearly identifies some sort of rural settlement.[21]

In light of such a complex range of terms, no clear-cut typology can be established. The impression is that the problem of the definition of the settlements depends on the fact that their morphology can be subject to multiple and simultaneous factors (topographic and environmental, social, economic and military). Moreover, the fact that proper urban centres are present in the same region and represent an indisputable 'central place' in the socio-economic and administrative local system does not necessarily imply that all the settlements under their control had exclusively an agricultural function, supplying the city with goods. Nor are they necessarily characterised by a low socio-economic stratification of the inhabitants, modest architectural quality, complete lack of planning and modest dimensions (smaller than 10 ha).[22] For instance, in the rural site of Shivta some blocks in the northern part of the settlements seems to

Fig. 5: Walls of Mampsis in the Negev.

follow some small-scaled planification, at least looking at the regularity of the streets in that area (fig. 3).

In my opinion, the criteria defining rural settlements need to be reconsidered, avoiding considering only one single feature. Especially the size of the settlement could be particularly misleading for our interpretation of the site. Comparing the case studies, it becomes quite clear that pretty large settlements could develop even in the rural context (fig. 4). If the size is not comparable with the larger urban centres, it is not rare to find, in Transjordan and Syria at least, "villages" extending for more than 10 ha. Some examples like Sharah and Umm el-Jimal are even comparable to a small city.

Therefore, the set of criteria has to consider either morphological or functional features, detecting in both of them possible marks of 'urbanity'. Clearly, the first do include size and density, but also the way the borders of the settlements are defined. To this regard, if one specific urban feature is the presence of walls (often with accentuated military functions), rural settlements present diversified solutions, relying either on natural characteristics of the ground (steep slopes or wadis) and on anthropic solutions (architectural features). Nonetheless, even where perimetric walls are built (more easily in open spaces like the steppe or large plateaux), they do rarely show proper military functions but seem to offer defence from simple incursions or maybe to express some sort of communal social identity (fig. 5). Elsewhere, more organised blocks of courtyard houses create a close front to the outside (either for the settlements or for single quarters too) (fig. 6). Sometimes the two solutions are combined, as in Umm el-Jimal.

On the other hand, functional features inform more clearly on the nature of the site. The impression for the Roman and especially Byzantine Near East is to have a well-developed intermediate level of settlements ("towns"), not necessarily related to the presence of a *polis* in the region. A good example could be the Leja in central Hauran (Syria), where the absence of larger urban sites and the strategic importance of the region encouraged the development of such rural "urban hubs"

Fig. 6: External block in Umm el-Jimal.

(among which the abovementioned *metrokomiai*). Sharah, for instance, not being one of the identified *metrokomiai*, still shows a complex functional pattern. The agricultural specialisation is well underlined by the widespread stables found in almost every residential unit,[23] but the presence of a wall surrounding the entire settlement and of several structures interpreted as military outposts, a public bath and a possible large sanctuary (apparently in use at least during the Roman period), and later also a mosque, suggest a 'semi-urban' dimension (fig. 7).[24]

In some regions, the late-antique boom in the countryside can be related to the new defensive strategy adopted by the Byzantine Empire to protect the eastern borders, encouraging local pastoral communities to adopt more stable living strategies and integrating more intensively some of their representatives into the administrative provincial system, as the example of the Jafnids well demonstrates.[25] For instance, Umm el-Jimal saw a dramatic expansion in the Byzantine periods, with a complete change in the settlement's organisation probably from the 5th century onward. Like Sharah, the site does not seem to have been a simple large "village": agricultural features like stables and fenced areas scattered in and around the settlement are well attested; but the wall surrounding the site, with a monumental gate (Commodus Gate), the 'New Barracks' (even if smaller than the earlier Roman fort), at least one large communal church (possibly bishop seat?) are indicators for a more complex reality.[26] Moreover, large empty areas, associated with structures and facilities like small fences and reservoirs, are possibly related to the caravan trade, suggesting also an interregional commercial importance of the site (fig. 8).

Fig. 7: Satellite image of Sharah.

To conclude, sites ascribed to an intermediate semi-urban level are an important component in the settlement's pattern in the Near East, especially in the late antique period, although they escape a clear terminological definition, either in

Fig. 8: Satellite image of Umm el-Jimal.

ancient or in modern sources. The surge of such "towns" can be related to various reasons, but they are clearly to be understood as urban hubs in the countryside, sometimes substituting proper urban centres if not present in the area or overtaking some urban functions after the evident changes witnessed by the cities from the 4th century onwards. Moreover, an accentuated policy engaging local communities could also have encouraged the development of larger settlements in the countryside. Therefore, archaeologists need to be aware of a bigger complexity than the simple urban-rural dichotomy when analysing a city and its countryside, especially in a moment of dramatic dynamism as in Late Antiquity.

Notes

[1] The paper will take into consideration English, since it is most commonly used in the scientific literature for the region investigated.

[2] Avni 2014, 196.

[3] Safrai 1994, 61.

[4] Avni 2014, 194.

[5] Topalov et al. 2014, 309.

[6] This dualism appears to be consolidated in the English language at least since the 18th century (Topalov et al. 2014, 309).

[7] Topalov et al. 2014, 308.

[8] Among others: Wirth 2000, 34–48; Walmsley 2012, 34–47; Avni 2014, 40–106.

[9] Mitchel 1992, 104 f.

[10] Dentzer et al. 2010.

[11] Topalov et al. 2014, 1227.

[12] In Europe, the term town undertook a shift from a vaguer use at the beginning of the Middle Ages (when it could also be used in a rural context) to a proper urban connotation at the end of this era. On the contrary, in the United States a more dimensional criterion is applied, meaning that a town is a larger settlement than a village, but still smaller than a city. Moreover, a stronger rural connotation is often implied (Topalov et al. 2014, 1228).

[13] In the Roman and Byzantine Levant, Greek terminology, though applied over a large region and consisting of a more or less standardized set of terms for settlements, has no univocal terms used to describe types of settlements containing less properly urban features, though still not entirely rural (Avni 2014, 194). It is interesting to note that despite the quite clear theoretical definition of polis mentioned above, the term is also used for rural settlements that surely lack any official recognition and are possibly elsewhere defined with other terms. Safrai mentions for instance the ambivalent use of the term in Josephus (Safrai 1994, 61 f.).

[14] Together with the aforementioned use of polis, historical sources also use its diminutive polichne or the term kome megiste, a "large kome", which normally defines more properly communities of independent farmers (i. e. villages). Moreover, it is interesting to note for Palestine that there is a different conceptualisation of the types of settlements between the Byzantine sources and the contemporary Jewish sources, where some reported towns of the Jewish texts are referred to as villages in the Byzantine ones (Avni 2014, 194 f.).

[15] Sartre 1999; Sartre 2005, 230–233.

[16] Sartre 2005, 231.

[17] The Codex Theodosianus (11, 24, 6; dated 3rd December 415) and the Codex Justinianus (10, 19, 8 and 11, 56; dated to the August 468). Apparently, they adopted the term in the light of its common use in the daily language.

[18] Sartre 1999, 210. Sartre does not exclude the possibility that the same term could have also been used with the same connotation in this period in other regions like Syria, Arabia and Palestine.

[19] Connected to the presence or absence of defensive structures and – most importantly – of the Friday Mosque and the minbar. The dimension, the population and the availability of commercial and guest facilities

are also used as defining features (Topalov et al. 2014, 684 f.). Still, not much of attention was paid to clearly distinguish between the several terms employed to describe the urban centres, notwithstanding the evident chronological and regional differences, and this leads to several ambiguities in their definition and application.

[20] Avni 2014, 196. Some terms were also used as synonyms, like madina and misr. Among the possible differences in their use in earlier phases of the Islamic period, medina possibly refers to administrative centres based in already existing settlements, while misr seems to describe a "city built ex nihilo" (Topalov et al. 2014, 47).

[21] Topalov et al. 2014, 1010. In the later acceptation, it might include settlements defined today as towns, or like metrokomiai mentioned in Greek sources.

[22] Safrai 1994; Hirschfeld 1997.

[23] Clauss-Balty 2010, 202–206.

[24] Clauss-Balty 2010, 200 f.

[25] Fisher 2011; Fisher 2015, 313–347.

[26] de Vries 1998; de Vries 2000.

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Fig. 1: Photograph by I. LaBianca, courtesy of Prof. B. J. Walker. – Fig. 2: Elaboration by author, on Google. – Fig. 3: Elaboration by author, on Google, and Hirschfeld 2003, 398 fig. 3. – Fig. 4–6: by author. – Fig. 7–8: Google.

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