

Rome: an Empire of Cities and a Sustainable Model of Urbanism? Preface

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In the reign of Antoninus Pius, Rome was praised by Aelius Aristides for having created the conditions, in which the cities of its Empire “shine with splendour and grace, and the whole earth is adorned like a garden”.¹ For the Mysian rhetor, this reality was obvious on account of the “*gymnasia*, fountains, *propylea*, temples, artistic works and schools of art”² populating provinces such as Asia, which, according to him, did not compare to any other region of the world in the number and size of its *poleis*.³ Across the Greek East, indeed, many of these vast urban networks had a long tradition, with roots predating the Roman occupation and a civic culture based on Hellenistic ideals such as philanthropy and euergetism.⁴ The Asian Aelius Aristides, however, was not only mesmerised by the continuity of this model sustained by competitiveness,⁵ but also extolled the Romans for having educated and transformed non-Greeks into a civic population under their rule.⁶

Few places in the Roman Empire illustrate this transformation better than the Iberian Peninsula. Since its conquest, Hispania underwent a profound process of urbanisation that reached its climax with the grant of the *ius Latii* by Vespasian in the second half of the 1st century AD.⁷ This imperial decision did not only impact the political organisation of the settlements, but also promoted new ambitious programmes of monumentalisation in the region. The present volume seeks to analyse whether the transformative nature of such changes was robust enough to survive the unfavourable circumstances that affected Roman rule between the end of the high Imperial period and the beginning of Late Antiquity.

The Roman Empire is commonly regarded as an “empire of cities”. This concept, however, should be linked not only to the multiplication of urban centres, but also to the creation of civic structures that oversaw political life and fiscal productivity in the territories assigned to those centres. From the early stages of the Principate, there was a clear tendency to favour the promotion of communities with different degrees of autonomy and local elites, on which the Roman provincial control could be based. The provinces of Hispania participated of this balance between local self-government and central power, constituting a reality, in which the functionality of the model can be assessed.⁸ Likewise, the provincialisation of the Iberian Peninsula after Augustus is rather unique with the universal extension of Latin rights in the Flavian period mentioned above. Vespasian’s grant affected both areas already reasonably urbanised such as *Baetica* and those in the inner *Tarraconensis*, where the effects of the new system of political organisation could be even more intense.⁹ A key concept in this process is that of *municipium*, a term with a complex history and etymology that entailed a status promotion for the majority of settlements in Hispania under Roman provincial administration.¹⁰

Municipia were, above all, political communities regulated by a set of constitutional rules favoured by Rome and privileged with a certain degree of autonomy. The implications of this model of local organisation can actually be illustrated by its spread in the Iberian Peninsula and the production of bronze tablets in which the new constitutions were precisely carved. Documents such as the *lex* of the *municipium* of *Irni* (southern Spain) contain more than 90 chapters detailing a broad range of aspects, from the election of magistrates to the celebration of religious ceremonies, financial issues, courts procedures and, very significantly, the acquisition of Roman citizenship by those –the *decuriones*– reaching the highest political positions.¹¹ While a letter sent by Domitian and appended to the end of the *lex Irnitana* reveals that the local population was still struggling to fulfill all the marriage restrictions imposed by the new charter some years after its publication, the Roman emperor warned about his refusal for future indulgencies; in other words, he was confirming the necessity to comply with the laws of the *municipium*.¹² The general grant of the *ius Latii* to Hispania can, therefore, be perceived both as an act of status promotion with no precedents in other provinces of the Empire and as a challenge to many local communities that needed to quickly adapt to the impositions of the new civic model. For example, those aspiring to political offices first needed to provide pecuniary contributions (*summa honoraria*) and sureties (*cautiones*) before holding positions that required further contributions (*munitiones*).¹³ The social costs of such positions could also be high,¹⁴ and the risks of balancing the budget were always present particularly in small municipalities with meagre financial means.¹⁵

Against this background, the embassies that the Flavian *municipia* of *Sabora* and *Munigua* sent to Vespasian and Titus should be understood.¹⁶ Despite the highly rhetorical tone employed in these diplomatic missions,¹⁷ both documents reveal the difficulties that the recent promotion of status posed not only in terms of political organisation but also as regards the construction of the facilities in which such civic obligations could be undertaken. Vespasian, for instance, allowed the magistrates and decurions of *Sabora* to build an *oppidum* under his name following their request. The excavations conducted in many of the new Spanish municipalities have equally shown a significant increase in monumentalisation projects completed between the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd centuries AD.¹⁸ The same archaeological evidence, however, points towards the reuse and abandonment of some of these constructions at the end of the Antonine dynasty and, particularly, during the 3rd century.¹⁹ Public areas could be usurped for private use; something contrary to the Roman civic order,²⁰ and many urban centres on the Iberian Peninsula suffered episodes of dismantling leading to the *deformatio ruinis*.²¹

This period between the high Imperial period and Late Antiquity was not only challenging for the provinces of Hispania but for Roman rule as a whole. The historian Cassius Dio famously described the reign of Commodus as the start of “an age of iron and rust”,²² when the Empire had already been affected by a mortal plague and wars that depleted fiscal surpluses.²³ Inflation ensued, military conflicts did not cease and the many

emperors struggled to guarantee the conditions, under which Roman urbanisation had previously managed to flourish according to Aelius Aristides. In this context, the *Historia Augusta* reports the existence of *oppida labentia*,²⁴ *ciuitates intermortuae* appear in the epigraphy,²⁵ and juridical sources document increasing episodes of people abandoning their civic obligations.²⁶

It is under such circumstances that the real robustness of the system of *municipia* as self-governing bodies in Hispania should be assessed. In contrast to the Asian metropolis, where Aelius Aristides resided, the model of political communities present on the Iberian peninsula after the Flavians did not stem from Hellenistic traditions, and can principally be attributed to a Roman imperial policy of urbanisation. While Rome could barely sustain its power, could this system be sustainable? Would the *municipes* of Hispania still be willing to contribute to their local obligations when Roman citizenship was not such a distinctive honour after Caracalla's *Constitutio Antoniniana*? Was there any point in maintaining the public *splendor* enshrined in the Roman legislation?²⁷ To tackle such important questions, a project was launched by Javier Andreu at the University of Navarra with the support of the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Innovation and the papers presented in this volume are, essentially, a result of these investigations.

The reader will find in it contributions by Prof. Andreu on the financial problems and material ruin of *splendidissimae ciuitates* that could become *oppida labentia*. Along the same lines, David Espinosa seeks to explore the ideological and institutional causes that may have led to the urban crisis evidenced by the archaeological materials of some *municipia* of Hispania in the 3rd century AD. Luis Romero Novella focuses on one of the settlements central to the research project, Los Bañales (Uncastillo, Zaragoza), and analyses the remodelling and reuse of the forum area in the same period. Conversely, Diego Romero takes on walls, streets and sewers as signs of the urban endurance of Roman Spain in the 2nd century and compares the evidence of settlements from *Baetica*, *Lusitania* and the *Citerior* regions. Tamara Peñalver presents the site of *Lucentum* (Alicante) as a case study to investigate whether the decline of many public areas was also mirrored in domestic spaces and, in particular, in a city that was promoted to municipal status by Augustus. Finally, Clara Forn, Pepita Padrós and Jacinto Sánchez's paper is centred on the evolution of *Baetulo* (Badalona) from its foundation as a *municipium* in the Augustan age to the appearance of signs of crisis in the archaeological records of the city.

Such a combination of specific analysis and general questions aims to offer an approach into issues, which are fundamental for understanding the continuities and changes of Roman urbanism on the Iberian Peninsula between the high Imperial period and the beginning of Late Antiquity. Each of the papers is therefore not only concerned with evidence for the possible scenarios of a general crisis, but also includes discussions about the sustainability of the system in general. The reader will likewise be able to comprehend the challenges faced by the civic communities of Hispania and question whether the model particularly consolidated during the Flavian period managed to stay in place with stable institutions and the political commitment of the local population. As result, the study of Roman Hispania both before and after the mid-2nd century AD

can have implications in the success of Rome as the power, which, recalling Aelius Aristides, educated its subjects to become civic communities, adorned with monuments and competing against each for splendour rather than survival.

Notes

¹ Arist., Orat. 26, 99.

² Arist., Orat. 26, 97.

³ Arist., Orat. 23, 8. Philostr. VS. 2, 548 stated the exaggerated number of 500 cities, also found in Josephus BJ II.6.4 (p. 366). Pliny the elder in the books IV and V of *Historia Naturalis* counts 176 settlements between Asia and southern Anatolia and, likewise, Ptolemy's *Geographia* just records 140. See, most recently, Hanson 2011.

⁴ See Gauthier 1985 and Gygas 2016.

⁵ Arist., Orat. 26, 97: "All the other rivalries have ceased, the only strife that remains for each of the cities is the following: to look the most beautiful and pleasant".

⁶ Arist., Orat. 26, 96.

⁷ Plin., Nat. 3, 30.

⁸ Rodríguez Neila & Melchor 2006.

⁹ Espinosa 2014.

¹⁰ García Fernández 2001, 125–180 and Andreu 2004.

¹¹ See D'Ors 1986 and González – Crawford 1986.

¹² *Irn.* 98, 33–43: *conubia comprehensa quaedam lege Lati scio et / postea aliqua si quit sollicitudo vestra indi/cat parum considerate coisse quibus in prae/teritum veniam do in futurum exigo me/mineritis legis cum iam omnes indulgen/tiae partes consumatae sint litterae datae.*

¹³ See Mentxaka 1993, 123–144.

¹⁴ Duncan-Jones 1990, 161

¹⁵ Corbier 1985 and Alföldy 1998, 18.

¹⁶ *CIL* II2/5, 871 (77 AD); *AE* 1962, 288 (79 AD).

¹⁷ See Blanco-Pérez 2019.

¹⁸ Brassous 2015, 287.

¹⁹ Melchor 2009.

²⁰ *Dig.* 43,8,1. 17; 50,10,5; *Cod. Iust.* 8,12,14. 17.

²¹ See *Irn.* 62 [cf. *Dig.* 43,10,2. 17]. See Diarte-Blasco 2012.

²² *Cass. Dio* 72, 33.

²³ See Lo Cascio and Potter 2004.

²⁴ *SHA. Marc.* 23

²⁵ *CIL* III, 352. See Arce 2015.

²⁶ *Dig.* 50, 2, 8. 50, 4, 2. 50, 5, 9; *Cod. Iust.* 10, 31.

²⁷ *Dig.* 50, 4, 6.

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