

The Economics of Urbanism in the Roman East: Introductory Notes

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This book is the result of a panel held on the nature of urbanism in the Roman East. It deals with various aspects of urbanism under the Roman Empire. Although the Roman East has different definitions in academic literature, here it is used to encompass different parts of the eastern Mediterranean. For the sake of brevity, Egypt and North-Africa are left out of this discussion. One excursion is made to the far western part of the Mediterranean. Damjan Donev's contribution showcases the transformation of urbanism between Hellenistic and Roman Imperial times on the Balkan. Paul Kloeg's chapter studies the effects of the environment on Roman urbanism the Levant and Mesopotamia. Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen provides a case study on historical perspective of the development of urbanism in Northern Anatolia, particularly the impact of the city foundations by Pompey the Great. For a western Mediterranean perspective, Pieter Houten contributes on Roman urbanism of the Iberian Peninsula, focusing on the problems of the juridical status of settlements. Finally, my own chapter covers a geographic approach to the urbanism of Roman Asia Minor.

This brief introductory chapter provides an overview of the geography of urbanism in the Roman East. The research presented in this introduction and in the contributions by Donev, Kloeg, Houten and myself were conducted during the last four years within the framework of 'Empire of 2000 cities' project at Leiden University, which was funded by the ERC and directed by professors Luuk de Ligt and John Bintliff.¹ This project aimed to collect data on various civic and physical aspects of cities. These include the juridical status of settlements and territories, the size of settlements and the presence of public buildings in settlements. This was done to add a quantitative 'big data' approach to the study of urbanism under the Roman Empire, which hitherto has been dominated by qualitative/comparative approaches and/or historical approaches, whereby the civic autonomy of the city was paramount. Here it was essential to not only to attempt to collect detailed and up-to-date information on the various physical and juridical aspects of cities, but also analyse the data in order to discern patterns in spatial distribution, diachronic development, hierarchy (both in terms of juridical status and rank-size), monumentality, and functioning of local and regional centres.

These approaches are anchored in the disciplines of geography and economics. Research to (early) modern urban networks has suggested that economic integration of an urban system is reflected in the hierarchy of cities as manifested through their size.² The differences in size of cities is considered a reflection or a manifestation of deep economic structures that are present in the societies that bring forth these cities. To entangle potential networks of cities in the Roman Empire, a special focus in the project was laid upon the extent to which cities formed networks, their connectivity and economic integration. Yet other formative factors on the urban pattern received

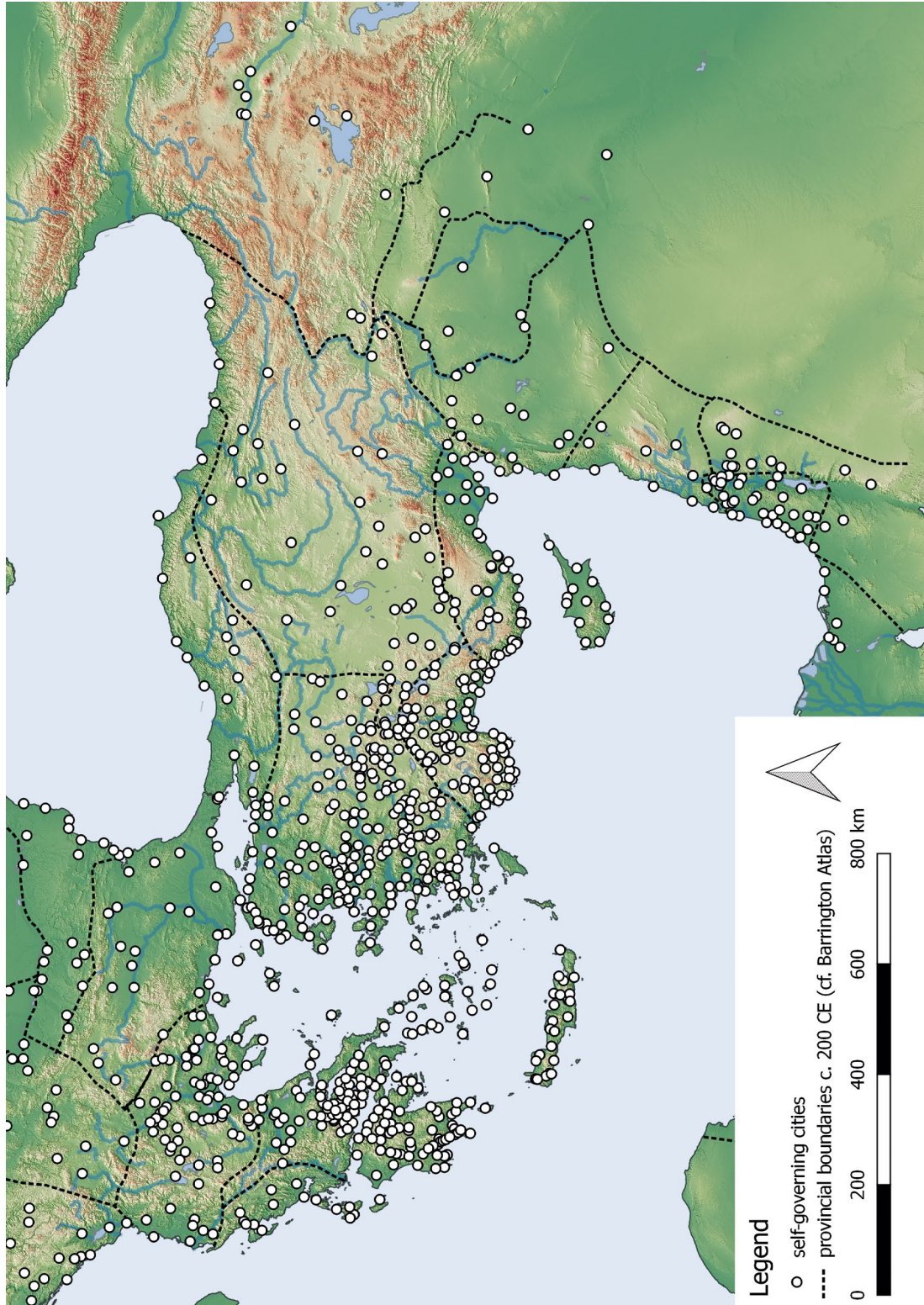


Fig. 1: The cities with civic autonomy (self-governing cities) in the Roman East.

equal attention, as previous interpretations of the economic integration of Roman urbanism have sometimes been too simplistic, ignoring assessment of the urban pattern within its political, historical and environmental contexts.³ The contributions in this book explore the diverse factors acting upon the formation and development of the urban pattern of the Roman Empire, thereby showcasing not only the spatial distribution of cities over highly disparate landscapes, but also the underlying complexity of Roman urbanism.

The Urban Pattern of the Roman East

The collected data make it possible to showcase the results of the ERC project for the entire Roman East for the first time. The data were collected by Donev, Kloeg, Michalis Karambinis, and myself.⁴ The primary focus will lie, for the sake of brevity, on those settlements which are considered cities by virtue of their civic autonomy during the second and third century CE. This category of juridical or self-governing cities proves a good starting point and indeed has been the focal point of past studies.⁵ Cities and communities with civic autonomy generally had jurisdiction over the taxation of their territory, while subject settlements did not possess such sovereignty. They were self-governing and various statuses are known for these cities. *Coloniae*, *municipia*, *civitates* capitals and so on are more typical for cities encountered in the western parts of the Roman Empire, while for the east, the *polis* was the more typical in the nomenclature for the autonomous cities. The sources used to determine status include epigraphy and ancient (geographic) descriptions, such as the work by Strabo, Pliny and Ptolemy. For the East, the habit of issuing coins by individual autonomous cities already started in pre-Roman times and many cities minted under the Roman Empire. This numismatic evidence also proves highly useful to reconstruct a settlement's civic status.

Civic autonomy was a desired status for the elite living in a settlement, as is evidenced by inscriptions.⁶ However, as Houten discusses for the Iberian Peninsula as well, settlements without civic autonomy could fulfil important functions as market places, residential foci, and so on. For an understanding of urbanism of the Roman world, and how cities came into existence and how they related to subject settlements, a full analysis of these 'secondary agglomerations' is necessary.⁷

The city was by no means a Roman invention and during the various stages of expansion towards the East, Rome encountered areas that were already heavily urbanized. The *polis* was a widespread phenomenon during Hellenistic times and although Bekker-Nielsen wonderfully presents examples of new Roman foundations, the majority of the cities existed before the Roman Empire took shape. Such historical path-dependency makes it perhaps less surprising that the resultant urban pattern is far from uniform in spatial distribution.

An overview of the self-governing cities demonstrates the variable density in settlement in the Balkans, Greece, Anatolia, and the Levant (fig. 1). In total, 997 self-governing cities

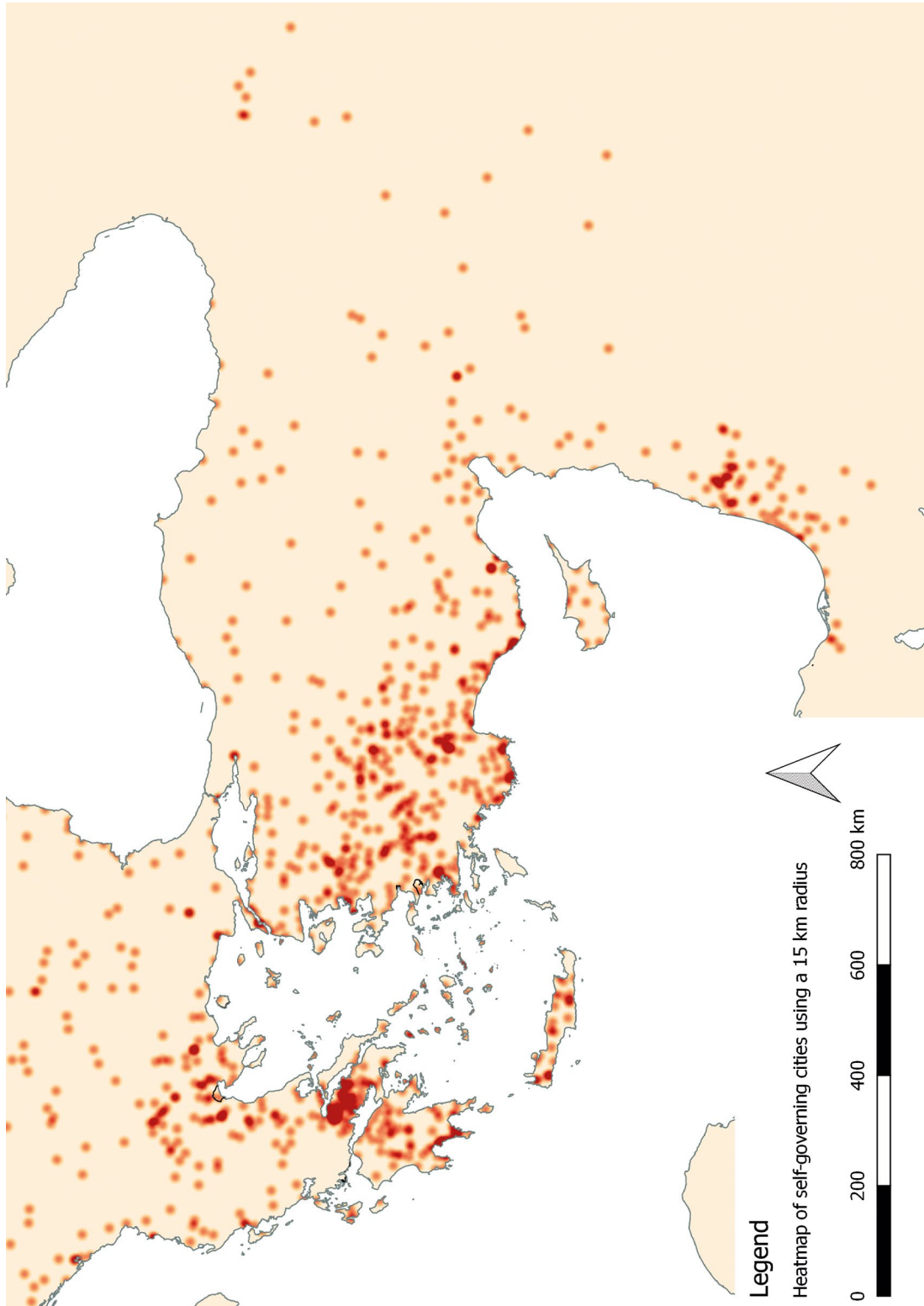


Fig. 2: The heatmap of self-governing cities shows clear clusters.

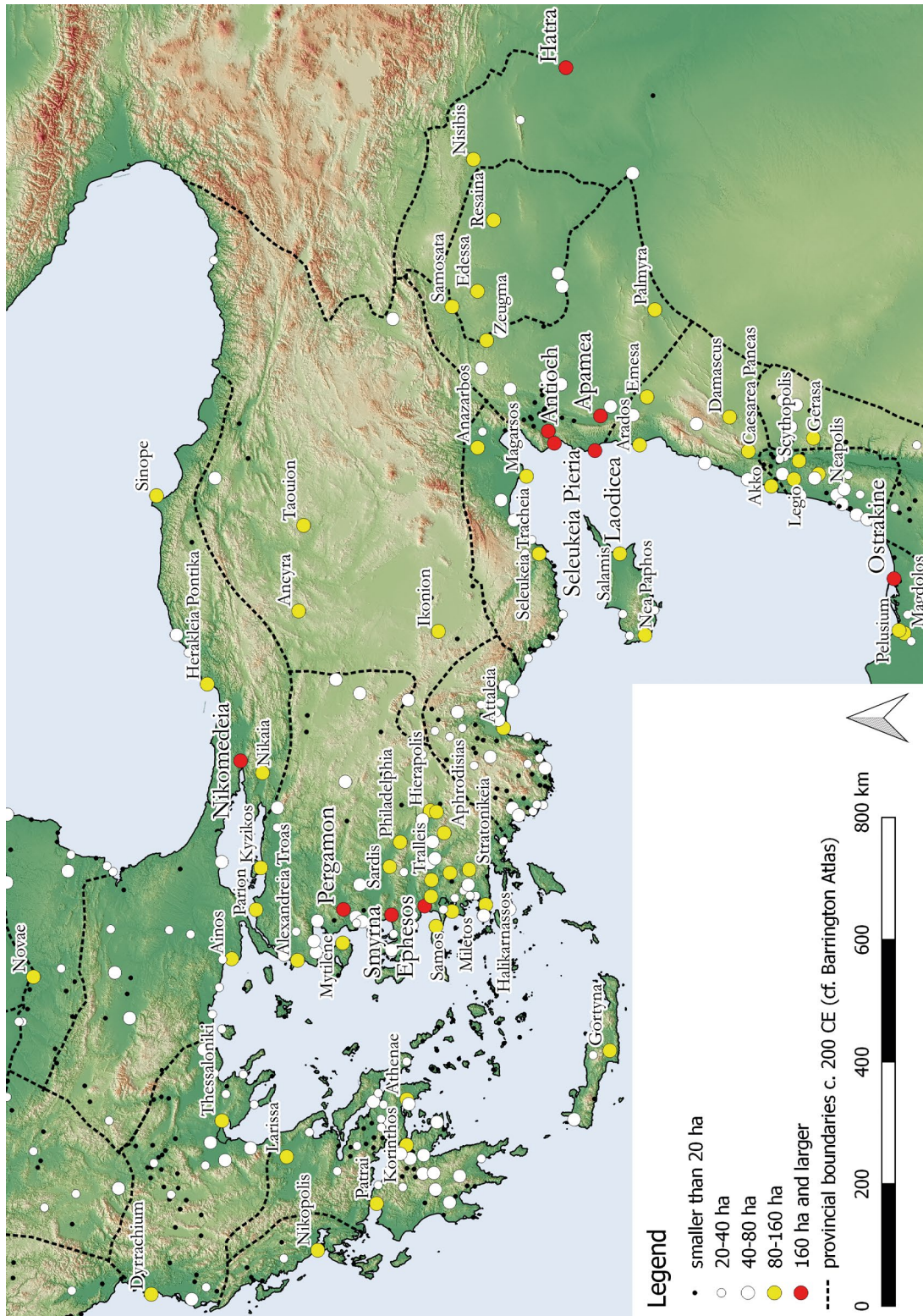


Fig. 3: The city sizes of cities in the Roman East.

were located here. Clearly, the coastlines facing the Mediterranean seem to form an attractor for urban settlement, with cities in inland areas being more evenly spaced. Yet in this general pattern, it is obvious that clusters of cities can be discerned, particularly when using a heatmap (fig. 2). This map is generated using 15 km radii around each autonomous city, or roughly a 3 hour walking radius. The clusters of cities clearly stand out in northern Greece, Boeotia and the Peloponnese. Also in Asia, Pisidia and Lycia and the Anatolian south coast, dense clusters are situated. The southern Levant also enclosed clusters of autonomous cities. The other areas clearly have a less dense pattern of cities with civic autonomy. This already shows the diversity of urban density in the Roman East but it also hints at the differences in the economic interactions between these places and the role cities played. Where dense clusters of autonomous cities are encountered, we can assume easier opportunities for interaction and exchange between these places.

The spatial distribution of self-governing cities already gives a complex pattern for the Roman East. With the addition of settlement size, the depth of this complexity increases. Although typically city size is expressed in the number of inhabitants, the size of a city during the Roman Empire, due to a virtual lack of ancient figures, must rely on proxies for ancient population levels. The most logical approximation for their size is the surface area covered by the city.⁸ Reconstructions of surface areas are most reliable when based on sound archaeological research executed on the sites of cities through excavation, survey and / or geophysical prospection. With the aid of aerial photography and plans, accurate measurements of the size of a site can be obtained. In some cases, older descriptions and illustrations can help greatly, particularly when a site has been built over or destroyed by modern urban development.

Only the sizes of self-governing cities are discussed in this chapter. Size gives a deeper insight into the nature of Roman urbanism in the east, which shows some marked differences with the maps only showing the location of self-governing cities. In total, for 604 of the 997 self-governing cities in the Roman East a measurement could be obtained (table 1). These data clearly demonstrate that the vast majority of cities with civic autonomy was small, with more than 50 % being smaller than 20 ha. Less than 2 % are over 160 ha.

Size category (in hectares)	Number of self-governing cities
Smaller than 20 ha	322 (53.3 %)
20 – 40 ha	110 (18.2 %)
40 – 80 ha	101 (16.7 %)
80 – 160 ha	59 (9.8 %)
Over 160 ha	12 (1.9 %)

Table 1: Size of self-governing cities in the Roman East.

The geographic distribution of these five size categories also shows that the large and very large cities are not evenly spread (fig. 3). While the Balkans saw a comparatively wide spacing with few large cities, Roman Greece had a denser pattern with a few large cities. The west coast of Anatolia is set with large and a few very large cities, while the south coast is dotted with many smaller ones. Towards the interior, few but comparatively large cities are present. The Levantine coast has a concentration with some of the largest cities of the Roman East in Syria, while further south a dense cluster of large and medium-sized cities existed. The variation in urban density is indicative for the variation of economic interaction and the economic role cities played.

Conclusion

The relationship of city-size with the densest clusters of self-governing cities is not uniform. Western Anatolia shows dense clusters of self-governing cities and the presence of large to very large cities; Syria was not as densely settled with self-governing cities but was home to some of the largest cities of the ancient world (most notably Antioch). This introduction has provided an overview of general patterns in the cities found in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. They reflect the complex political, societal underpinnings of the cities under the Roman Empire and the factors that shaped the patterns. Although general geographic remarks on the spatial patterning can be made, it is clear that a discussion in more detail reveals more about these underpinnings and the interactions and interdependencies that were possible and that existed between cities.

Notes

¹ De Ligt et al. 2014.

² De Vries 1984; Krugman 1996.

³ E.g. Marzano 2011; Hanson 2016; see also Donev – Willet 2017.

⁴ Michalis sadly could not contribute to this book, but his findings on Roman Greece have been published in Karambinis 2018.

⁵ E.g. Jones 1971.

⁶ Kolb 1993.

⁷ All the final publications by Donev, Karambinis, Kloeg, and myself included a study of these settlements as well. These also form the gazetteers of the primary data of cities and settlements used for the analyses.

⁸ Hansen 2006; Willet 2012.

Image Credits

Figs. 1–3: by the author.

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