Aspects of Roman Urbanization in the Hellenistic Balkans

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The first word that springs to mind when looking at the basic parameters of the urban geography in the Hellenistic part of the Balkan Peninsula in Roman Antiquity is modularity. If we exclude the mountainous zones, the spacing of Early Roman towns in this area is fairly regular and the differences in size between individual towns are relatively small. This property of the regional urban network is inscribed in the physical geography of this region, made up of series of discrete micro-regional units, separated from each other by high mountains. It seems that the urban map of the area is merely an echo of its physical geography; each micro-regional unit hosts an urban centre that was largely indistinct from the urban centres in the neighbouring micro-regions. This impression is reinforced by the view that the Romans, in concurrence with their principles of minimum interference in the newly-conquered territories and respect for local autonomy, made little changes to the existing network of urban settlements that traces its roots to the late Classical – early Hellenistic period. Although there is some kernel of truth in this description of the regional urban geography, it is far from encapsulating the local specifics and it ignores the dynamic aspects of the urban system. This brief study of the transformation of the regional urban system between the periods prior to and after the Roman conquest will demonstrate that, although only a few urban settlements had been established after the conquest, the urban geography of the area had undergone important changes.[1]

The Limits of the Study Area; How Do We Define the Hellenistic Balkans?

The term Hellenistic Balkans is used to denote those parts of the Balkan Peninsula that had come under Greek influence by the time the Roman Republic got actively involved in this part of the Mediterranean. This was one of the crucial factors that differentiated the study-area from the lands in the Balkan interior in the period after the Roman conquest. The towns and settlements that belong to the following historical regions are included in the analysis: Liburnia, coastal Dalmatia, the territories of the Illyrian and Macedonian kingdoms, Thrace and the Black Sea coast (fig. 1). At a first sight, it may appear strange that our notion of the Hellenistic Balkans includes areas – Liburnia or the Dalmatian coast – that were brought fully into the Roman sphere of influence, but of far greater significance for the present analysis was the fact that the introduction of the urban form of life in these regions preceded the Roman conquest and was mediated by the Greeks.[2] This zone also roughly corresponds to the areas that had been under continuous control of stable polities for centuries prior to the Roman conquest. In contrast to the Balkan interior, the great majority of the Roman towns in the Hellenistic Balkans predate the Roman conquest of the area.

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Fig. 1: Map of the Balkan Peninsula and the study area.

The Limits of the Dataset: which Settlements Qualified as Towns in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Balkans?

From a Hellenocentric perspective there were no other towns in the study-area apart from the Greek colonies on the Adriatic and Black Sea coast prior to the Roman conquest. If we loosen the definition in order to include the central places of the Hellenistic kingdoms and *koina* in the Balkan interior, it will be very difficult to differentiate between major military and economic centres and local tribal strongholds. However, the truth is that this conundrum seems more complicated than it really is. The two principal criteria used to delimit the dataset were the existence of references to the town and its institutions in the written sources and the archaeological evidence of public buildings, large private residences, local crafts and industry and the construction technique of the circuit walls. In other words, both functional and juridical criteria are used to define the dataset for the present study.[3] A closer look at the empirical data will doubtlessly discover examples of settlements that satisfied these criteria but had never been recorded as towns, or of historically attested autonomous towns that did not have the material attributes of

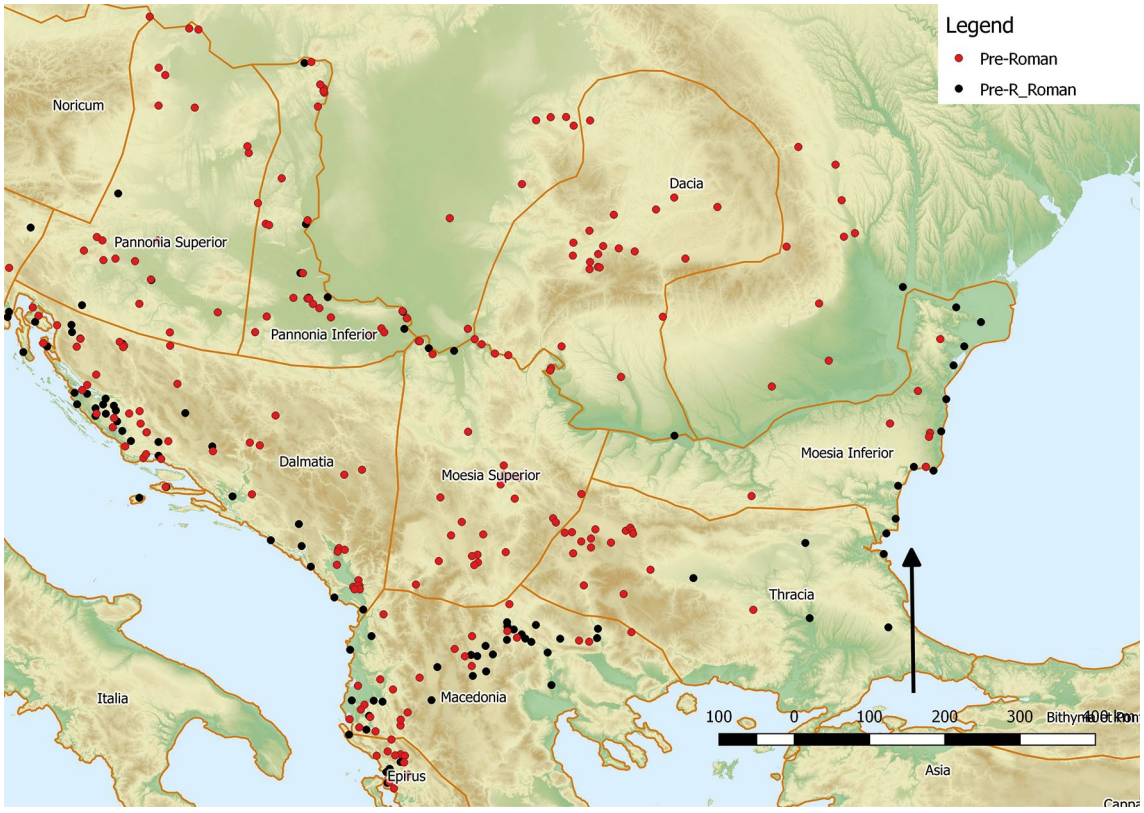

Fig. 2: Map of pre-Roman settlements, abandoned (red dots) and existent (black dots) under the High Empire.

urban settlements, but it has to be admitted that, for the greater part, these two sets overlap. Within a big-data approach, this is virtually all that matters.

The Map of Urban Settlements in the Study Region on the Eve of the Roman Conquest and in AD 200

From a cross-cultural perspective, the parts of the Balkan Peninsula that are the focus of this study were highly urbanised in the centuries prior to the Roman conquest. In certain parts of the study area – Liburnia, the southern Dalmatian coast, northern Epirus and parts of Macedonia – the urban density is close to that recorded in the most urbanised parts of the Hellenistic world, central or southern Greece or the western coast of Asia Minor.[4] Urban settlements had emerged in nearly every settlement niche that included arable territories of at least 20 km^2. Consequently, the territories of most of these towns fell in the range between a few hundred and 1000 km^2, whereas the presence of secondary agglomerations is poorly attested (fig. 2).

Obviously, this pattern is not uniform across the study-area. In the mountainous parts of the Illyrian and Macedonian kingdoms and in Thrace, the inter-city distances increase to over 50 km. However, this is mainly a consequence of the regional geography. The only true outlier in relation to the urban density in the study-region is Thrace. Only a handful of Thracian settlements can be qualified as towns in the period prior to the Roman conquest, most of which continued into the Roman period. Although Thrace had been exposed to the urbanising influences from the Greek world centuries prior to the Roman conquest, the advance of urbanism was held back by a set of social and economic factors that are poorly understood.[5]

Fig. 2 also shows the settlements that had been attested as towns in the written sources dated to the Roman period and those on which continuous occupation after the Roman conquest has been demonstrated archaeologically. It is evident that de-urbanization was the predominant trend in most parts of the study-region after the Roman conquest. This is particularly pronounced in southern Illyria and northern Epirus, an area in which less than half of the urban settlements had survived the Roman conquest.[6] However, this conclusion is fully dependent on the criteria used to discriminate between the settlements that had survived the conquest and retained their urban status and those that had been abandoned or lost their status. For example, the towns that are not mentioned in the written record after the conquest are excluded from the map of Roman towns. The question is, is this enough to proclaim a demotion or complete abandonment of these towns? Even in cases in which systematic excavations have recorded a caesura after the Roman conquest, the possibility that the settlement had shifted to another location should not be excluded.[7]

	Pre-Roman	Roman
Liburnia	34	28 (22)
Illyria/Epirus	35	11
Upper Macedonia	32 (25)	21

Table 1: Number of pre-Roman and Roman towns by region; alternative estimates in brackets.

Table 1 summarises the fluctuations in the number of urban settlements between the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the regions of southern Liburnia, Epirus and Illyria and Upper Macedonia. This simple comparison shows that the transformations of the urban map followed different paths in different parts of the study region. Whereas there is an evident decline in the number of towns in Liburnia, parts of Illyria and Epirus, the changes in Upper Macedonia are hardly perceptible, especially if we accept the possibility that the local *koina* known from inscriptions were autonomous communities.[8]

It is difficult to make a similar comparison for Thrace, but if we reject the view that the western Thracian towns continued from the pre-Roman period, we will have to conclude that the Roman conquest of Thrace resulted in an increased number of urban settlements.[9]

The main dilemma of the present study is to decide if the Roman conquest of the area lead to de-urbanization or restructuring of the existing urban networks? Admittedly, simply comparing the number of urban places between the two periods does not take us very far, because the decrease in the number of towns could have been offset by the growth of the towns that outlived the Roman conquest. However, any attempt to study the changes in settlement size between these two periods is impeded by inadequate data. Nevertheless, the little evidence we have, suggests disparate developments, even within the same micro-region. (Table 2) In Liburnia, southern Illyria and Epirus, it seems that the size of most settlements did not change after the conquest. But this is merely a consequence of the fact that most of these towns have been poorly researched. The only indicator of their size are the Hellenistic city walls. It is highly symptomatic that some of the better-researched towns in southern Illyria had experienced significant changes in the size of their built-up areas under the High Empire. In the case of Apollonia, the built-up area seems to have contracted by at least 20–30% by the Severan period,[10] while Buthrotum nearly tripled in size after the Roman conquest.[11] If we nonetheless accept the figures in table 2, we would have to conclude that, although the number of towns declined in both Liburnia and Epirus, the underlining trends in these two areas were divergent. The total urban area – and also possibly the urban population – saw an increase of about 15% in Liburnia after the Roman conquest, but in southern Illyria and northern Epirus, it had been reduced by one quarter. Upper Macedonia and Thrace conform to the Liburnian pattern. With the exception of some of the Greek colonies on the western Pontic coast, most of the pre-Roman towns that survived the Roman conquest had multiplied their built-up areas by the time of the late Principate. Stobi and Philippopolis are the most telling examples.[12] Thus, in these parts of the study-area, the number of urban settlements may have declined after the Roman conquest, but the sizes of a few chosen towns had increased substantially.

	Min_Hel	Max_Hel	Min_Rom	Max_Rom
Liburnia	90.6	213.4	144.5	252.7
Illyria/Epirus	/	472.1	294.7	368.7
Upper Macedonia	145.5	249.5	196.7	283.2

Table 2: Changes in the total urban area (in hectares) between pre-Roman and Roman times.

Fig. 3: Distribution of Liburnian settlements by size-ranges in the pre-Roman and Roman period.

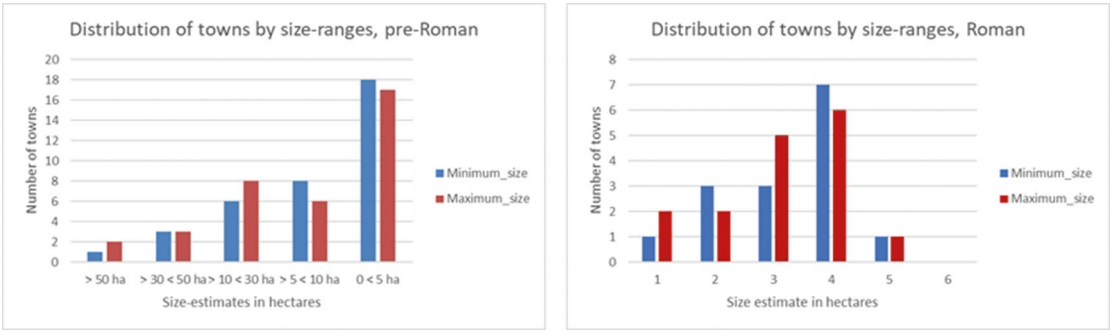

Fig. 4: Distribution of Illyrian and north Epirote settlements by size-ranges in the pre-Roman and Roman period.

These patterns become somewhat more comprehensible once we turn to the changes in the settlement hierarchies. Figures 3 and 4 show the distribution of Liburnian and Epirote settlements by size-ranges in the periods before and after the Roman conquest. As in table 2, both the minimum and maximum size-estimates are considered. In both areas, the post-conquest period saw a massive reduction in the number of very small settlements, i.e. those that measure less than 5 ha. This is in tune with the observed decline in urban density. The key difference between the two areas is in the upper size-ranges. Whereas in Liburnia, the decimation of the settlements smaller than 5 ha is offset by an increase in the number of medium-sized settlements (>10 <30 ha) and the emergence of a new regional centre, (>30 ha) in Epirus and Illyria, the changes in the upper size-ranges are insignificant and mostly negative. In addition to the near disappearance of the smallest size-category, the number of medium-sized settlements is also visibly reduced. Seen from this angle, centralisation had taken place in Liburnia and Upper Macedonia, de-urbanization in Illyria and Epirus.

The greatest obstacle to the study of the dynamics of the urban systems in the study-area is the poor quality of the data on size. Because most of our size-figures refer to the walled areas of the settlements in the pre-conquest period, the likely fluctuations in the built-up

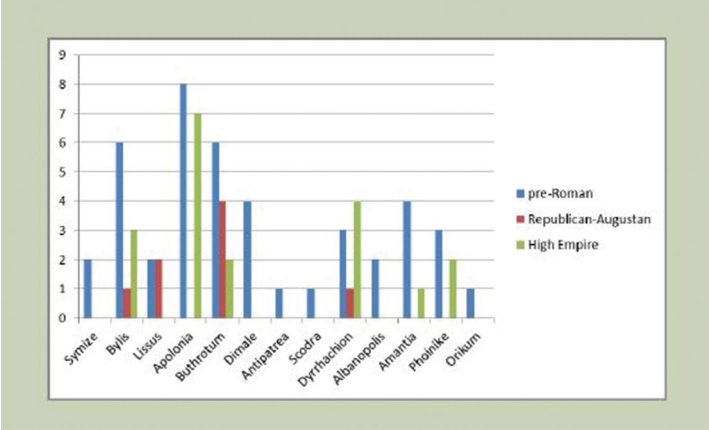

Fig. 5: Distribution of major public constructions in the towns in Illyria and northern Epirus.

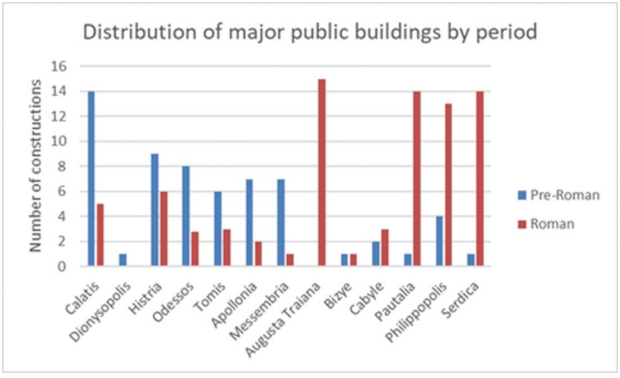

Fig. 6: Distribution of major public constructions in the towns in Thrace and on the western Black Sea coast.

area are veiled. In some areas, it seems as if nothing has changed from pre-conquest times. An alternative way of measuring the changing fortunes of the urban systems between the two periods is to compare the number of newly constructed public buildings in the pre-Roman and early Roman period (figs. 5 and 6). This analysis shows that, yet again, developments were not uniform across the study area. Nonetheless, it is both possible and useful to make a few general observations. The urban fabric of the late Hellenistic towns in Liburnia, Thrace and Upper Macedonia is lost under the buildings constructed in the Roman period. The only sign of the pre-Roman origin of these towns is their micro-location and, in some cases, the city-walls. Although they had been founded in the pre-Roman period, towns like Iader, Philippopolis or Stobi were Roman creations. Almost the opposite trend prevails among the towns in northern Epirus and southern Illyria, and the Greek colonies on the western Black Sea coast. These towns had preserved their ancient layout and a large number of public buildings, especially the temples, were constructed prior to the Roman conquest.

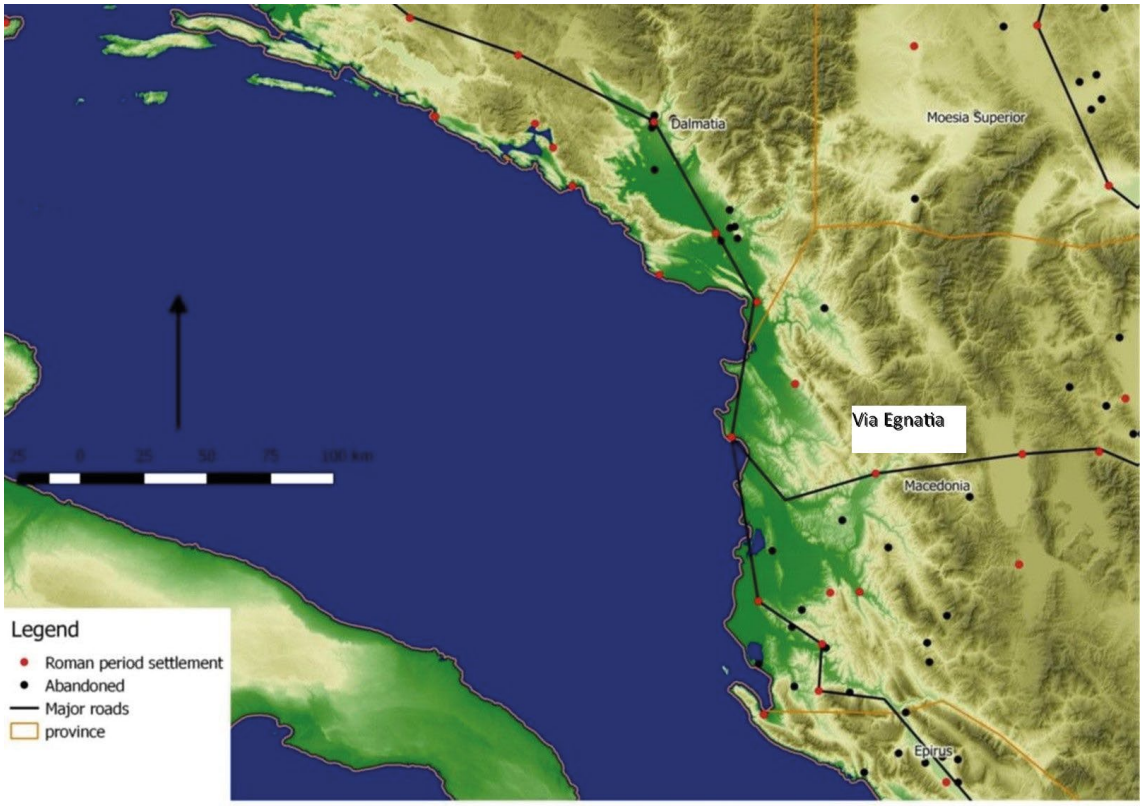

Fig. 7: Map of pre-Roman settlements and major roads in Illyria and northern Epirus.

This is not a straightforward indication of the changing levels of prosperity between the two periods. It can be argued that, in many of these towns, the basic amenities of urban life had been established by the time of the Roman conquest and the construction of new public buildings would have been unnecessary. It is equally plausible to argue that the elites in the towns that had preserved their pre-Roman constitution and identity were more inclined towards investing in festivities than in public construction. However, for some of the towns in figures 5 and 6, the lack of evidence of construction works, in conjunction with the inconspicuousness of the urban elite in the epigraphic record, can only be read as a sign of urban decline.

So far, we have observed the transformations of the urban systems by sub-regions and the differential developments of individual towns or town-categories have been shifted out of focus. Probably the most important aspects of the urban geography of the study-region after the Roman conquest are the partial preservation of the old settlement network and the reshaping of the old hierarchy. Which segments of the old urban network were privileged under the High Empire? It has already been demonstrated that the great majority of the towns that were abandoned after the conquest were those that belonged to the smallest size-category. Turning to the spatial distribution of the towns that were abandoned and

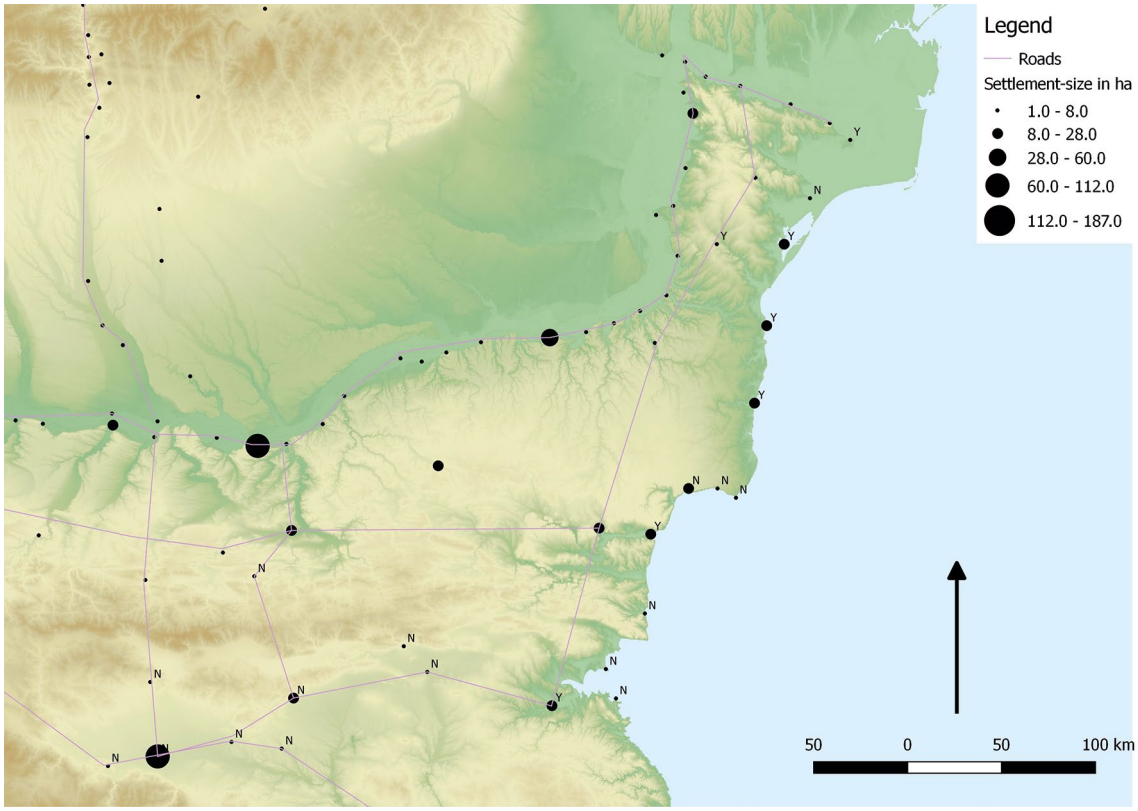

Fig. 8: Settlement size and distribution of communities of Roman citizens in Thrace and on the Black Sea coast.

those that continued after the Roman conquest, it does not take much to notice that in all parts of the study-region, in which a decrease in the number of towns has been recorded, the urban network had contracted to the main axes of communication that linked these areas to the Italian Peninsula and Rome (fig. 7). The old market and religious centres of remote and mountainous areas were either abandoned or in decline. Furthermore, only the towns that were located on major regional crossroads and ports of call saw an increase in the size of their built-up areas and an increased frequency of construction of public buildings. It is not by accident that this group of towns closely matches the group of pre-Roman *poleis* that had been granted the status of *municipia* or colonies in the late Republican or augustan periods, or the *poleis* that attracted sizeable communities of Roman citizens, usually organised in *conventus* or *phylai* (fig. 8).

Although a large number of small poleis in the study area had retained their autonomy after the Roman conquest, the economic outreach of their elites would have been limited to the micro-regional horizon. In contrast to this, the romanised elites of the towns that were granted the status of *municipia* or colonies enjoyed access to a wider range of economic resources, often located beyond the urban territories. This could have been one of the key

factors that led to differential growth among the pre-Roman towns in the study-region. The Roman conquest of the area brought an end to the existing urban constellations that served the interest of the regional powers. Only those segments of the urban network that were positioned on the main roads that linked the area to Italy were successfully integrated into the new urban system. These points in the network would have been far more attractive to the Roman coloniser than the remote polis, regardless of the latter's age, status or renown. This preferential colonisation of the urban network would have led to further differentiation between the pre-Roman *poleis*, because the native aristocracy would have also chosen to move to the new regional centres.

Summary

In view of the large extent of the study-area, the variable developments in its different parts should not be surprising. Although the Hellenised belt of the Balkan Peninsula had been exposed to urbanising influences ever since the Archaic period, its constituent parts were not equally receptive to the processes of urbanisation. In most of the study area, urbanisation took hold centuries prior to the Roman conquest, but Thrace was an exception and it remained comparatively under-urbanised throughout the early Roman period. In most parts of the study region – Thrace was obviously an exception – the number of urban settlements decreased after the conquest. This process of de-urbanisation was of variable intensity. It was particularly pronounced in Epirus, and certain parts of Liburnia and Illyria, less so in Upper Macedonia, whereas in Thrace, the opposite tendency prevailed. Even in those areas in which the Roman conquest resulted in a decreased number of urban settlements, it is unclear if the overall trend was one of de-urbanisation because, although a number of small towns probably declined or were abandoned, some of the towns that continued after the conquest multiplied their built-up areas or were thoroughly rebuilt. In fact, we can be certain in claiming that genuine de-urbanisation took place only in Epirus and Illyria, but the transformations of the urban systems in Liburnia and Upper Macedonia can only be described as centralisation.

Not all of the towns that were incorporated into the system of provincial government prospered equally under the Romans. Only a small percentage of these towns experienced a period of growth and prosperity under the High Empire. These towns were the key points in the newly established network of supra-regional roads and shipping lanes. They were also the hubs of Roman colonization of this region. The towns that made up this urban category were visibly larger than the majority of the old *poleis* and usually boasted a wider range of public buildings when compared to the average polis. Although the Romans introduced only a small number of newly founded settlements in the Hellenistic part of the Balkan Peninsula, the incorporation of this region into the Roman Empire laid the foundations of a new urban hierarchy.

Notes

[1] For more details, see Donev forthcoming.
[2] Wilkes 1969; Davison et al. 2006.
[3] De Ligt 2012.
[4] Hanson 2016.
[5] Valeva et al. 2015.
[6] Shpuza 2009.
[7] Cf. the example of Albanopolis, an ancient town in Illyria that, according to the archaeological excavations, were abandoned soon after the Roman conquest; Islami 1972. However, Albanopolis is recorded as a civitas of woman from Scupi in a second-century inscription; Josifovska-Dragojević 1971.
[8] Papazoglou 1988.
[9] Ivanov 2012.
[10] Lamboley et al. 2012.
[11] Hansen et al. 2013.
[12] Mikulčić 2003; Kolarova – Bospatčieva 2005.

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Fig. 1–8: author.

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