

From *splendidissima ciuitas* to *oppidum labens*: on the Causes of the Financial Problems and Material Ruin of Roman Provincial Cities at the End of the High-Empire*

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Abstract

As literary sources sometime recalls the end of the 2nd century AD was a very complex and hard time for provincial administration and for the urban life and its development, at least in the West. The Roman provinces of Spain, which years before have been granted with the benefit of Latin Right by Vespasian and with many municipalities working there from the second half of the 1st century AD, offers to scholars a very remarkable area, in which the problems of the municipal model can be analyzed. According to archaeological evidence, this paper summarizes the main causes of the weakness and crisis of small and medium-size Roman *municipia* of Spain, trying to offer, also, a theoretical model for a better understanding of this complex process with local and general causes involved as well as circumstantial and structural problems of the municipium as model of local administration.

Over the past few years, there has been renewed interest in Roman urban life, at least in Hispania, not only from an archaeological point of view but above all from an historical and even legal perspective. Since the mid-1990s,¹ the city has become a preeminent field of analysis, from which to obtain information on the most significant historical processes of Rome, in both the complex times of the Republic and the more stable political and administrative reality of the High Empire. The works that have been published on monumentalisation, the prime movers behind this process² and the attention being paid lately to the phenomenon of euergetism,³ the economic foundations of urban reality⁴ and the keys to its legal functioning⁵ thus evince this.

In this context, over the past five years and at least from the perspective of the Iberian Peninsula, there has been a tendency to favour a vision of the evolution of the urban phenomenon, which, to a certain extent, has broken with the traditional conception (fig. 1). The latter – excessively dependent on literary texts and historical accounts of events that, as is known, were complex – associates the end of the Roman-style urban world with a series of historical developments, the majority, of which took place as from the second half of the 3rd century AD, and, which have traditionally fallen into the historiographical category of the so-called ‘crisis of the 3rd century AD’.⁶

According to this traditional vision, the ruin of some western cities would have been due to invasions – which, in turn, would have led to the process of fortifying or castellating many urban centres between the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century –, to the economic woes and financial straits of the Roman state at the time, and also to the

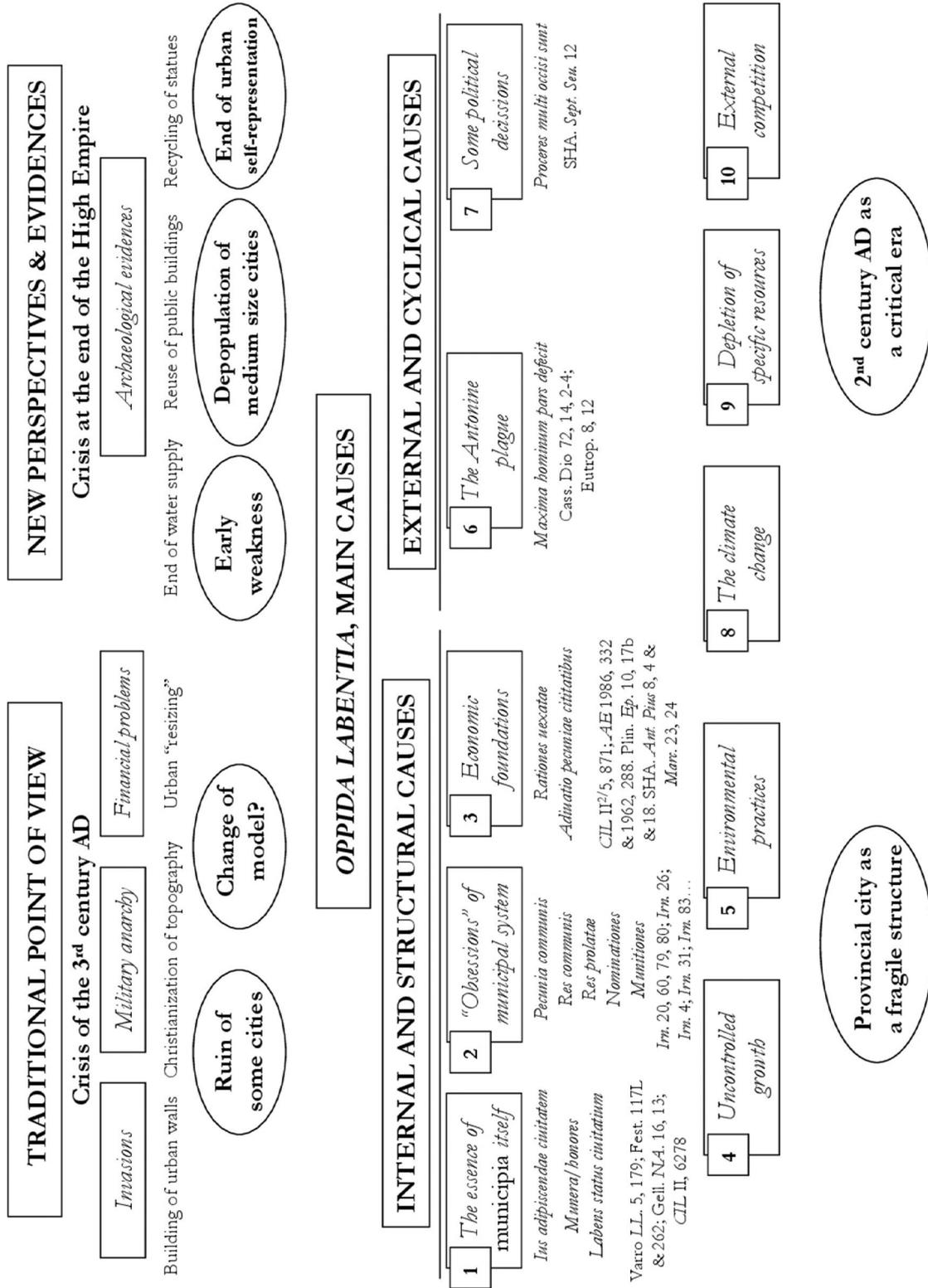


Fig. 1: Cities in decline at the end of the High-Empire: general approach.

effects of the well-documented military anarchy. The subsequent influence of Christianity, furthermore, with the consequent Christianisation of the urban topography,⁷ would have ultimately resulted in a dual process, in which some cities would have become depopulated and impoverished in the critical 3rd-century context, while others would have been reshaped⁸ producing the often-invoked 'change of model' in the late antique city, radically different from its high-imperial forerunner, and, on which we have already expressed our doubts in a previous work.⁹

This new perspective, founded on the confirmation of the chronological parameters of the archaeological material record,¹⁰ has blamed the crisis and the transformation of many of those urban centres on processes that began to be felt at the end of the High Empire, thus endorsing, in this sense, Cassius Dio's poetical account of the transition of the Roman Empire, following the reign of Commodus, from a golden age to another of iron and rust.¹¹ If, in the traditional view, the invasions, the military anarchy and the tax pressure were presented as the manifestations and, at the same time, the causes of the phenomenon, with this new perspective other evidence, all of which has been clearly substantiated in excavations of ancient urban centres of different legal statuses and populations, point to a process of urban transformation that might have even begun in the Antonine period. Namely, the symptoms of economic, financial and political weakness evinced in some Hispanic communities as from the end of the Flavian period, the progressive depopulation and abandonment of some medium-sized communities and, lastly, a decline in the local elites' self-representation habit can now be understood as key phenomena with which to explain the material transformations, of which we are gradually gaining a better understanding thanks to archaeological excavations.¹²

The shutting down of urban water supply systems, the reuse or drastic change in the function of some public buildings, and the process of abandoning and recycling of official sculptural programmes are thus clear indicators of the lack of incentives in 2nd-century cities. It should not be forgotten, though, that it is impossible to talk about a widespread phenomenon all over the west. For any analysis of this process the local and regional dynamics should be taken into account by treating each urban centre as if it were a microcosm, in which it is essential to consider elements such as its legal status, its connectivity, its exploitation of resources, its economic activity, and the *potentia* and involvement of its elites, etc.,¹³ as some of the following contributions indeed do.

Since both perspectives – the traditional and the most recent and novel – share the notion of the city as a juridical and political reality with precarious and, therefore, redundant foundations, it may be held that they have also denied the general value of historical processes and their necessary study based on an analysis of local casuistry. From both viewpoints, the provincial city has been presented as a remarkably fragile economic reality and the period prior to the years of the 'crisis of the 3rd century' has been determined as a critical age of changes, doubtless very attractive for researchers.

In light of the above, and as will be appreciated in the issues and cases addressed following this general approach and overview, the focus of the discussion should now shift towards

a reality poetically described in the *Historia Augusta* and in the Latin juridical epigraphy at the end of the 1st and at the beginning of the 2nd century AD, specifically the *oppida labentia*,¹⁴ viz. cities in decline. While taking into consideration the phenomenon's unequal territorial impact, its causes should be identified, determining whether these were internal and structural or external and cyclic or of a one-off nature, without logically ruling out – as has been suggested recently – that both types of causes might have intervened in the decline of the urban system, as it had been known since the progressive spread of the Roman way of life in the Augustan age, or, in some cases, in its radical disappearance.

Of that set of causes and dynamics – which may seem like fertile ground for speculation, but in which we have no choice but to delve (fig. 1) – it is possible, to our mind, to single out 10 main ones: five relating to the structural causes, deriving from the very idea of the city and its own problems, and the other five to external and transitory processes that might possibly have been more destructive as from the second half of the 2nd century AD. The legal essence of the municipal model, its juridical obsessions and economic foundations, the material growth of many urban centres after having been legally promoted to municipal status and the environmental practices of many of them – the majority of which were, moreover, inherent to the Roman ideal of a provincial city – could be regarded as structural causes that might have impeded to such an extent the upkeep of the amenities and features of urban life of the High-Empire.

For their part, the effects of the Antonine plague, some political decisions of a general scope, the climate changes experienced during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, with their respective agricultural and, therefore, economic consequences, the depletion of certain resources, and the phenomenon of interurban rivalry number among the cyclic causes that, particularly felt in the mid-2nd century AD, might have been behind the process that transformed the ideal of *splendidissima ciuitas* – which the local elites contributed to dignify and monumentalise – into another much more convoluted but equally attractive one. Namely, that of the aforementioned *oppida labentia*, which, among other things, was characterised by a change in mentality of the local elites, now more, focused, as from the beginning of the 3rd century AD, on exhibiting their wealth in a personal, and essentially rural, context than on its socialisation in the urban setting.¹⁵

In the Hispanias, as explained in one of the contributions of this panel, it was during the reign of Augustus, perhaps from a more material perspective, and the Flavian period, from a completely juridical one, when urban life flourished most.¹⁶ With the *ius Latii* decreed by Vespasian, the *ius adipiscendae ciuitatem per magistratum* – namely, the granting of Roman citizenship to those who became officials in their respective *municipia* – became a tool for accrediting and adapting the functioning of communities extraneous to Roman law.¹⁷ However, that privilege, based on the perception of political activity as a *honor*, was associated with a series of *munera*, namely, the personal rendering of services by candidates, which apparently was only possible during the years of economic prosperity for the local elites and which, nonetheless, led to a *labens status*, according to the *epistula* of *Italica* (CIL II, 6278) and the progressive political absenteeism of many members of the ruling classes.

It is true that in some places there was still evidence of curiae, *decuriones* and, therefore, magistrates, in the second half of the 3rd century AD.¹⁸ But as was argued many years ago, the ruin of many of these cities that had embraced the Roman legal system by obtaining municipal status was preceded by the local elites' disengagement.¹⁹ For the *municipia Latina* was, to a certain degree, an extraordinarily voluntarist model, in which local initiative was given free rein, thus converting it, or not, into the guarantor of its own success.

In this connection, a detailed study of the most frequent topics envisaged in the legislation that articulated the functioning of these communities²⁰ – the well-known *leges* of *Salpensa* and, especially, of *Malaca* and of *Irni* (CIL II, 1963, 1964 and AE 1986, 332) – enables us to perceive the extent, to which the imperial administration itself conceived these centres as potential 'shooting stars' that had to meet a number of requirements, which, in view of the fact they often appear in Roman legal documents on bronze, could practically be described as obsessions. These obligations included the sustainability, growth and management of the municipal budget (*pecunia communis municipum*); the protection and promotion of the common weal (*res communis municipum*); the need to adapt the complex management of public affairs to an eminently agricultural calendar, for farming was the social base of the local elites and, therefore, of many Hispanic municipal communities (*res prolatae*); the need to co-opt, forcibly in necessary, candidates for the magistracies (*nominaciones*) and, in particular, the decurionate, in the eventuality of a shortfall in the number stipulated by law; and, lastly, the need to make municipal manpower available for providing specific services on a regular basis (*munitiones*) all meant that the voluntarism characterising the makeup of the political cadres in charge of municipal management was forced onto to the civic body, both the *municipes* and the *incolae*.

To that list of shortcomings, which must have surely posed a threat to the smooth political running of many communities of municipal status, should apparently be added a series of problems that exacerbated, if possible, the model's demands and which, in many cases, made themselves felt at moments when the unique or cyclic circumstances, which we will examine later, were at their most virulent.²¹ Firstly, thanks to early literary documents – especially the correspondence of Pliny the Younger²² – we are fully aware of the massive outlays and the equally strenuous financial efforts that many communities in Asia Minor had to make to furnish themselves with – some maybe unnecessary – infrastructures that gave them *dignitas* but whose construction and subsequent upkeep were certainly demanding from both a technical and economic point of view. There are many accounts in the *Historia Augusta* about the financial support, with which the emperor necessarily had to provide many indebted communities.²³ This was a very grave matter when bearing in mind that, as already noted, the economic foundations of the communities in question were of an essentially primary nature. In this respect, determining the financial commitment and the sources of wealth of the cities affected by these processes of urban transformation is a key challenge if we want to know whether the phenomenon of the *rationes uexatae*, described by Pliny, was merely the result of uncontrolled growth or due to the problematic – or, at least, deficient – procurement of resources.

In many cases, to these political requirements the material demands per se must be added, in our opinion, that were linked to the very idea of the high-imperial city.²⁴ Both when the model of the *ciuitas* became widespread during the reign of Augustus and those of the first emperors of the Julius Claudius dynasty, and during its legal development in the Flavian period, cities undertook vast building projects, which, in part, were not only a consequence of the political demands discussed above (*curiae*, forums, etc.), but also in part the result of the desire of these urban centres to feel that they belonged to that great city-planning *oikoumene* engendered by Rome.²⁵ As has been frequently highlighted, the endeavours of the local elites to make the clearly indigenous ancient cityscapes meet the minimum—symbolic and practical—standards of Rome must have plunged local communities and their magistrates deeply in debt, obliging, in fact, municipal legislation to guarantee the upkeep and caretaking of buildings that were as spectacular as they were costly. In this regard, over the past few years, attention has been drawn, from the perspective of landscape studies, to the not always sustainable environmental practices of many of these provincial Roman cities and to the environmental impact that their economic and leisure activities²⁶ might have had. Albeit unexplored, this issue might have been behind the ruin and abandonment of many provincial communities in the peninsula's interior.

As a matter of fact, in daily political decision-making, in the functioning of the executive bodies, in the establishment of annual budgets and spending limits and in the maintenance of a series of minimum standards of urban comfort and architectural dignity, the foundations underpinning communities granted Roman municipal status must often have been shaky and fragile. These wobbly structural foundations could be shaken, as is only logical, by specific circumstances of an occasional or cyclic nature – mostly emerging in the second half of the 2nd century BC, some of which had already done so before although on a less intense scale.

Although it is impossible to gauge its real impact, the Antonine plague, on the one hand – which led to the death of most of mankind, as Eutropius dramatically puts it²⁷ – and the state repression of the revolt in favour of Clodius Albinus, on the other, could have been behind the massive depopulation of certain cities either because of the loss of their inhabitants or as a result of the curtailment of their privileges or the purging of their *proceres*.²⁸ Although these types of reasons have been invoked as causes of the early ruin of two well-known Hispano-Roman communities, namely, *Labitolosa* (La Puebla de Castro, Huesca) and *Torreparedones* (Baena, Cordova),²⁹ the documentary evidence that allows us to confirm these – at any rate, plausible – claims is far from being categorical.

It is therefore desirable that further studies be performed that enable us to determine what might have been the main and secondary causes – for it is clear that there was not just one – behind the processes described here. The same applies to the matter of climate change witnessed as from the reign of Marcus Aurelius, which would have led to a severe drought resulting in the destruction of the economic and agricultural foundations of many western communities. Admittedly, the crisis of the cities must have had economic roots,

for, as has been seen, they were also obsessed with the management of their budgets and with safeguarding the public coffers. It is possible that a process such as climate change did indeed accelerate this decline, but it should be recalled that, in many cases, it seems that Rome subjected the *territoria* of these cities to such an intense process of exploitation that this might have depleted specific resources or, at least, have made their exploitation more profitable in the countryside.

The process of *aemulatio* that many cities, vying with other neighbouring urban centres – some of which are covered in the following contributions – had experienced for centuries might have also resulted in an early selection of communities, thus reshaping the peninsula's urban map and allowing only those cities with wealthier elites and more diverse resources, which ultimately might have received external financial support as well – either from the Roman administration or, later on, from the Church – to survive a process that carried away a large number of them. In any event, archaeological research still allows us to catch glimpses of a greatness that, on many occasions, as we are seeing – and as some of the following case studies reveal – contained the seed of their own ruin.

Notes

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¹ Bendala 1993; Dupré 1993.

² Horster 2002.

³ Melchor 1994; Goffin 2002.

⁴ Le Roux 1999.

⁵ Pereira 2011, with literature.

⁶ Bravo 2012, with literature.

⁷ Kulikowski 2004; Diarte 2018.

⁸ Witschel 2009, with literature and discussion.

⁹ Andreu forthcoming.

¹⁰ Vaquerizo et al. 2014; Ramallo – Quevedo 2014; Brassous – Quevedo 2015.

¹¹ Cass. Dio 71, 36.

¹² A compilation of some cases in Andreu 2017.

¹³ Arce 2015.

¹⁴ SHA Marc. Aur. 23, 3.

¹⁵ Alföldy 1998; Mata 2014.

¹⁶ Curchin 2014.

¹⁷ García Fernández 2001.

¹⁸ Melchor 2017.

¹⁹ D'Ors 1953.

²⁰ Andreu forthcoming; Mentxaka 1993.

²¹ Jongmann 2007.

²² Plin. Ep. 10, 17, 3. 18, 3 and many others listed in the figure.

²³ SHA Ant. Pius 8, 4 & Marc. Aur. 23, 24.

²⁴ Ando 2014.

²⁵ Martín-Bueno – Sáenz 2014.

²⁶ Ruiz del Árbol 2017 with references.

²⁷ Eutrop. 8, 12.

²⁸ SHA. Sept. Seu. 12.

²⁹ Magallón – Sillières 2013, 453 f.; Ventura 2017.

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Fig. 1: by the author.

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