

# In search of late Roman porticoes

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HENDRIK W. DEY, *THE AFTERLIFE OF THE ROMAN CITY. ARCHITECTURE AND CEREMONY IN LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES* (Cambridge University Press 2015). Pp. xiv + 291, color pls. 8, figs. 48. ISBN 978-1-107-0918-3. \$99.

This ambitious study starts in 3rd-c. A.D. Syria and ends in 9th-c. Gaul. The connective thread is spun of two primary arguments. First, late antiquity witnessed “the emergence of a new urban paradigm, conceived and financed by and on behalf of the sovereign of the Roman world, which placed unprecedented weight on ... colonnaded thoroughfares and their associated monuments” (24). Second, this paradigm was “capable of transcending more prosaic economic and demographic realities” (1) and persisted across the post-Roman world. The first argument generates a useful account of urban life as represented by many late Roman élites. The second is, in the author’s own words (245), “a more speculative attempt to explore an intuition”; the attempt is productive, even if the argument strains to accommodate the evidence.

H. Dey’s “new urban paradigm” joins an architectural complex to a ceremonial function. The former, “an interconnected axis of city gate, porticated street and locus of imperial power” (46), appears across the empire from the 3rd through the 6th c., in both imperial residences and provincial capitals. The latter embraces a variety of processions (*adventus*, triumph, transfer of relics, etc.) that moved from gate to locus. The colonnaded street served as a backdrop to the processions and as a frame for spectators “dutifully assembled and arrayed along the porticoes” (95). Such political uses rendered the portico “the ‘imperial’ architectural feature *par excellence*” (68).

Dey offers various points of access to this paradigm, including material remains, textual accounts, and visual representations. His account of the Embolos at Ephesos, whose colonnades were interspersed with honorific statues, textual acclamations and *topos* inscriptions, is especially strong, even if here (as often) the paradigm is only partially manifest (the Embolos links two agorai, not city gate and palace). The discussion of urban images from manuscripts (the *Notitia Dignitatum*) and mosaics (Santa Maria Maggiore, Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo, Madaba Map) is also compelling. In the repeated distillation of cities into gates and porticoes, Dey discovers “the methodical privileging of a very selective reality” (125) — a phrase that also characterizes his own approach to the late Roman city.

By emphasizing the ceremonial use of porticoes, Dey hopes to circumvent a debate between economic decline and cultural persistence: both accounts “make not only individuals and events but even cities and urban living epiphenomenal” (7). The “post-processual” (15) solution is “the reintroduction of people ... not as an undifferentiated mass quantified in abstract demographic terms, but rather as individuals” (9). More specifically, Dey is concerned with “everyone that mattered” (11) or “VIPs” (12) — those who profited from expansion of the state apparatus and the consolidation of episcopal resources. These are the individuals whose “prevailing views, or mental images, of urban topography” are mediated through the surviving corpus of late-antique panegyric, which illustrates “the predominance of porticated vistas” (86). Dey also inherits their view of the labor force: his “crowds” and “thongs” regularly “cheer” and “teem” but seem never to work or build, mock or riot.

For the first half of the book such selectivity is justifiable, as it permits access to a mental image shared by those agents who, from the 4th through the 6th c., had the resources and the will to remake old cities and found new ones. This image becomes matter at Justiniana Prima, a “plausible facsimile of the cosmopolitan city” (107) with gates, porticoes, and episcopal and administrative complexes — but no room for residents. The selective view becomes a problem, however, as we move into the 7th c. and beyond. In the second half of the book, Dey aims to

show that something of the late antique city lived on in both the minds and the daily experience of enough of the powerful — *and by extension their subjects* — to make the likelihood of such a connection [sc. between late-antique and high-mediaeval urbanism] inherently plausible (20; emphasis added).

What he in fact supplies is a fascinating and variegated set of new paradigms, each dissimilar to the other: here processions without porticoes, there porticoes without processions, rarely the twain conjoint.<sup>1</sup> Lacking a socially differentiated view of the late Roman city, he is unable to supply a compelling explanation for the differences (or indeed is unwilling to recognize them). Thus the Visigoths and Merovingians offer plenty of processions, but the search for porticoes leads into conditional wilds (178):

If traces of monumental porticoes surviving into, or built new during, the seventh and eighth centuries are to be found, it will surely be along these central urban arteries.

Even the central arteries are elusive. Dey hopes to discover a “single axis” (158) in Toledo that connected two city gates and passed by cathedral and palace. However, his plan (fig. 4.4) depicts less an axis than a meandering arc, “following the outline of the modern streets”. A depiction of Toledo from a 10th-c. manuscript is understood (156) to represent “the essence of the capital city inherited from the late Roman world”; it shows gates and churches, but no porticoes.

Dey also claims persistence of processional routes in Lombard Italy, but the criteria invoked to reconstruct their courses are inconsistent. At Pavia, the construction of a church outside a city gate that lies on Dey’s preferred axis is part of a “conscious effort ... to create a privileged monumental axis” (181). At Benevento, by contrast, the Lombard church of Sant’Ilario, built outside the northern “Porta Aurea” (the mediaeval name for the Arch of Trajan), is omitted, as not lying on Dey’s “monumental itinerary” (183). Occasionally a desired conclusion mutates into a premise. Thus the Pavian *Porta Palatiensis*, mentioned by Paul the Deacon, should be located at the E terminus of the old *decumanus*, since “such an ostentatious monument is likely to have been placed to be experienced by the largest possible number of people, and thus on much the most frequented road in the city, where indeed it would have been impossible to avoid” (181). The gate accordingly becomes “the architectural exclamation point on the palatine end of a linear armature of conspicuous and symbolically pregnant edifices” (182).

As we head farther east, porticoes appear and processions become scarce. The Roman colonnade along the Lechaion Road at Corinth, well maintained into the High Middle Ages, offers hope (195) that similar monuments await discovery:

I am (unsurprisingly) inclined to see more than coincidence behind the fact that one of the late antique and Byzantine provincial and metropolitan capitals most susceptible to detailed archaeological investigation has preserved unusually clear signs of precisely the sort of monumental architectural triage that I propose characterized the approach of urban authorities across much of both the Latin West and the Byzantine East in the seventh–ninth centuries.

I would quibble with “authorities”. Students of Byzantine Corinth recognize the persistence of commercial activity in this area but argue that the administrative center lies elsewhere, as yet unexcavated.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps shopkeepers maintained the colonnade, with no help from emperors, administrators or bishops. Similar considerations apply to the *Arkadiane* at Ephesos and to the colonnaded avenue at Anazarbos. Even if, as Dey suggests, they were maintained into the Early Middle Ages, were “prominent representatives of church and government” (209) necessarily responsible for their upkeep? Only if we accept that in the 7th and 8th c. “nonélites ... presumably lived away from the comparatively monumental armatures” (247) — which is not at all self-evident.<sup>3</sup>

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1 They were certainly paired in ecclesiastical processions at Rome and imperial processions at Constantinople, but Dey has set himself the challenge of demonstrating that Constantinople in particular was not exceptional; see, e.g., at 131.

2 G. D. R. Sanders, “Corinth,” in A. E. Laiou (ed.), *The economic history of Byzantium: from the seventh through the fifteenth century* (Washington, DC 2002) 650; id., “Recent developments in the chronology of Byzantine Corinth,” in C. K. Williams II and N. Bookidis (edd.), *Corinth, the centenary: 1896-1996* (Princeton, NJ 2003) 395-96; A. R. Brown, “Islands in a sea of change? Continuity and abandonment in dark age Corinth and Thessaloniki,” *Int. J. Hist. Archaeol.* 14 (2010) 236.

3 The *Arkadiane* in Ephesos is an E–W street connecting harbor to theater. As-yet-unpublished surveys indicate the presence of an early mediaeval settlement in the area of the harbor; perhaps

The cities of Umayyad Syria present the strongest case for the persistence of the full architectural-ceremonial paradigm. Dey appropriately draws attention to the pseudo-city Anjar, where colonnades abound, and to Damascus, about which more could be said. The *temenos* wall of the temple/church/mosque preserves material traces of multiple adjoining porticoes (in addition to the preserved colonnade that still joins suq to mosque at the west). Porticoes connecting the S wall of the mosque to the palace are described in mediaeval sources, and survived into the 19th c.<sup>4</sup> Here, at last, is a solidly attested portico linking a (*temenos*) gate and a locus of imperial power from the Early Middle Ages, which might be paired with the ample textual evidence for ceremonial, including procession and acclamation.<sup>5</sup>

The study concludes with a coda on Carolingian monasteries and the residence at Aachen. Here there are porticoes and ceremonies, but no cities. Indeed, the primary reward of following Dey's paradigm through various post-Roman contexts consists in the regional and chronological divergences that it reveals. These form a spectrum, from wholesale adoption to complete abandonment. Dey admits a few cases of the latter (Britain, the Balkans, later mediaeval Anatolia), which he seeks (209) to attribute to settlement by "peoples (initially) foreign to the urban traditions of the Classical Mediterranean". This is a blunt instrument for comparison, which, if consistently applied, would soon be reduced to absurdity (try to rank according to "foreignness": Arabs, Berbers, Celts, Franks, Goths, Lombards, Slavs, Turks ...).

A more refined analysis would have to begin with a socially differentiated view of the late-antique urban paradigm, one that includes conflict, dissent and disinterest. There were other ways to inhabit a portico than "dutifully assembled": proud in the product of one's own labor, or in the wares of one's shop; or alienated and afeared of state violence.<sup>6</sup> Recognition of these possibilities would provide a more robust baseline, one able to reveal the impact of changing social relations in the early mediaeval successor-states on divergent patterns of urban development. But such an approach may be too abstract for Dey, who (139)

will consciously avoid recourse to the likes of Weber and Foucault and their followers. Were the introduction of contextually extraneous sociological or anthropological grand theorizing necessary, I would rather cite Clifford Geertz ... without for a minute claiming that the early medieval Mediterranean and nineteenth-century Bali (or anywhere else) can or should be assimilated into a generically applicable theoretical framework.

Here we can agree to disagree. As long as humans live together in cities, there is value in generating and refining frameworks that permit comparison of different historically-recoverable responses to recurrent challenges. Those who make the effort will find much of interest in Dey's porticoed vistas.

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they will reveal something of its social composition. At present, the only identifiable elite residence within the early mediaeval (7th-c.?) walls is the so-called "Byzantine palace", a *domus* built in the 5th c. well north of the *Arkadiane*. High-quality tableware and imported amphorae from the 7th c. have been found within: see S. Ladstätter, "Ephesos in byzantinischer Zeit: das letzte Kapitel der Geschichte einer antiken Grossstadt," in F. Daim and J. Drauschke (edd.), *Byzanz — das Römerreich im Mittelalter*. Teil 2,2: *Schauplätze* (Mainz 2011) 503-6 (ceramics, walls, harbor settlement); A. Pülz, "Das Stadtbild von Ephesos in byzantinischer Zeit," *ibid.* 554-56 (palace).

4 Remains of porticoes are noted passim in C. Watzinger and K. Wulzinger, *Damaskus: die antike Stadt* (Berlin 1921). For the colonnade connecting mosque and palace, see F. B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: studies on the making of an Umayyad visual culture* (Leiden 2001) 139-47, with arguments for an 8th-c. date.

5 A. Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic monarchy: accession and succession in the first Muslim empire* (Edinburgh 2009) 134-44.

6 For an example of the latter, see Alan Cameron, *Circus factions* (Oxford 1976) 320 with n.8.