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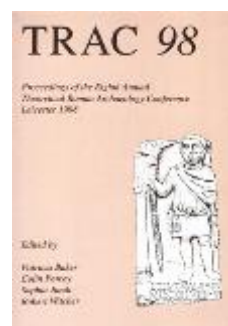
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Change or No Change? Revised perceptions of urban transformation in late Antiquity

by Anna Leone

Introduction

Defining a town is still problematic. Different approaches have been used to identify the essential characteristics of a town, but these are not always entirely convincing. It is possible, in analysing different disciplines and theoretical schools to identify two main ways to approach studies of the town. The first (and the most used in archaeological work) is directed at the analysis of the monuments, topography and materials of different towns (i.e. physical structures). This approach is spelled out by Carver in his *Arguments in Stone* 'a town is a centre of population.... Towns contain monuments,... are places where objects are exchanged,... provide amenities,... [and]... are hosts to industry'. (Carver 1993:2-3)

On the other hand, for others, the emphasis is on the society that lives in the town, that is, on social structures and processes. This second approach is subsumed in the principal points enumerated by Basham, following Childe in *The Urban Revolution*:

Early cities were more extensive and densely populated than previous settlements,... inhabited by full time specialist craftsmen, transport workmen, merchants, officials and priests,... supported by tithes or taxes of primary producers,... possessed of a ruling class of priests and civil officials.... Centers where a leisured literate was able to develop and elaborate systems,... artisans gave new dimension to artistic and craft expression.

Basham (1978:50)

Looking at all these aspects, we can propose that, ideally, to understand a town and its evolution one should consider both of the above aspects, that is, the social and the monumental/topographical data. In the words of Roncajolo (1988:3), the right way is to analyse 'the society and the spatial form of a town'. This is logical, since a society does not create its own environment just to satisfy its physical and social necessities, but also to project into the real world some of its expectations and ambitions. Thus, the town is principally the image of the society that lives inside it, and is a reflection of the ideals of its inhabitants.

Such considerations should be valid for all periods of urban history; but for late Antiquity the problem is more complex. It is harder to isolate and understand the evidence for urban spaces, both because of their rapid transformation and the overall restricted amounts of information available. In fact, in analysing the archaeological evidence, it must be borne in mind that much information has been lost during the excavations of the nineteenth century – and even in a greater part of this century – typically because archaeological research has been directed primarily towards investigation of the Roman or earlier layers. The more ephemeral materials used to build most structures further hinders their recognition and interpretation. On the other hand, it is also necessary to bear in mind that, even in the recent excavations, it is very difficult to single out the late antique levels. For example, the Vandal layers (fifth century AD) in Carthage (Humphrey 1980:87-91) cannot be pinpointed easily, not least because of the long period of circulation of both coins and pottery (Roskams 1996:159-60).

Considering these problems, studying late antique towns is always difficult and the debate on the right approach to the archaeological evidence is still open. Starting from this point, I shall firstly attempt to define the character of a late antique town, analysing in detail the case of Carthage in the fifth century; then I will re-examine the problem of 'continuity or decay'; and

finally, I will single out some elements related to the archaeological evidence that might be re-considered for the comprehension of late antique urbanism.

In chronological terms, by late antique, I refer to the post-classical period; the chronological range, between the fifth and the seventh centuries, must be adjusted in each geographical area, depending on different historical events.

The image of late antique towns: the case of fifth century Carthage

First of all, it is essential to summarise briefly, as a case study, the principal archaeological evidence for Carthage during the fifth century, after the Vandal conquest. This is the period from which a transformation of Classical Roman Carthage can be said to begin. The fifth century historian *Victor Vitensis* (*Hist. Pers. Afr. Prov.* 1.8–9) attests the destruction, wreaked by the Vandals, of various monumental public buildings including churches; but rather than analysing the devastation of these buildings in detail, we can reconstruct the town's character after the conquest, concentrating on change and continuity in the use of these different buildings.

The first piece of evidence is provided by the decay of public buildings and sometimes their reuse with different functions. The *termae Antonini*, on the coast (Figure 1, n.1), were probably abandoned in the fifth century (Lézine 1968:67–73, 1969:40), and then reduced in size and reused, with the same function, from the sixth century. The *forum* of the imperial town shows signs of losing its monumental aspect, with the judicial *basilica* (Figure 1, n.2) being completely abandoned; only the Proconsular Palace (Figure 1, n.3) was maintained, now acting as the seat of the Vandal government (Lézine 1968:177–80). In sharp contrast, poor-quality housing has been identified within the ruins of some public buildings destroyed during the Vandal invasion. Also in the *forum*, on the *Byrsa* hill, the colonnade along the *cardo maximus* (Figure 1, n.4) was firstly blocked and, later, transformed into a line of small houses (Deneauve & Villedieu 1977:107; Deneauve & Villedieu 1979:151).

Various churches were completely destroyed, such as the two monuments described by *Victor Vitensis*, the *Basilica Maiorum* (Figure 1, n.5), in the northern sector and the *Aedes Memoriae* (Figure 1, n.6), one of the oldest Christian buildings in the town, presumably identifiable with the circular monument, built at the beginning of the fourth century on the north side of the town (Senay 1992). The Vandals also destroyed the fourth-century *Basilica of Carthagenna* (Figure 1, n.7) built in the centre of Carthage, near the harbours (Ennabli 1997:59–70). The destruction of these religious buildings was a result essentially of the contrast between the Vandal Arian Church and the native Roman Catholic faith. Despite this contrast, the continued presence of some religious buildings inside the town is recorded, such as the Monastery of Bigua (Figure 1, n.8) built at the end of the fifth century (Bairam-Ben Osman & Ennabli 1982; Duval 1972:115), in the north eastern sector of the town, and, outside the urban area, the Church at *Bir el Knissia* (Figure 1, n.9), in the south western sector (Stevens 1993:9).

Another element which characterises fifth century Carthage is the presence of tombs inside the town. Some parts of the harbour complex were abandoned and the small monumental island in the centre of the circular imperial harbour (Figure 1, n.10), was now occupied by poor tombs (Hurst 1994:114). Graves were also found around the rectangular harbour (Figure 1, n.11) (Ben Abdallah 1990; Stevens 1995).

The peripheral areas of the town also demonstrate evidence for decay and the construction of poor structures. At *Teurf el Sour* (Figure 1, n.12), on the north western side of the town (Carandini *et al.* 1983:43–55), as well as in the *Av. Bourguiba Salammbou* quarter (Figure 1, n.13), in the south western part of Carthage, excavations have shown the abandonment of some structures (Hurst & Roskams 1984:17); even if traces of productive activities and cultivation were also identified (Hurst & Roskams 1984:17–9). Continuity of use is nonetheless attested primarily by rubbish deposits in the same suburbs. At *Teurf el Sour* (Figure 1, n.12), inside the town wall, excavations have established that this area was occupied by poor-quality structures in wood and mud brick (Carandini *et al.* 1983:14–6). The same situation occurs in the



Figure 1 Plan of Carthage

Av. Bourguiba Salamboo quarter (Figure 1, n.13) (Hurst & Roskams 1984:14–6). Sometimes these poor structures blocked former streets, determining a change in the regular organisation of the earlier imperial urban areas (as shown in Italian excavations, in the northern part of the town, in *cardo* VI, Carandini *et al.* 1983:35; 50).

Despite this many rich houses, built or enlarged during the fourth century AD, were still in use and even restored during this period, sometimes marked by the presence of production areas. All these elite buildings lie in the centre of Carthage. The house of the Greek Charioteers (Figure 1, n.14), constructed between the end of the fourth century and the first quarter of the fifth century as a late Roman peristyle house, went through several phases – marked by new floors – during the Vandal period (Humphrey 1980:106). In the house of the *Cryptoporticus* (Figure 1, n.15), near the theatre, the east gallery of the peristyle and its north sector were repaved during the fifth century (Balmelle *et al.* 1990:14). A rich house (Figure 1, n.16), near the *Byrsa* hill, with a private bath suite, built in the fourth century, was in use without interruption throughout the fifth and sixth centuries (Styrenius & Sander 1992). By contrast, another residential quarter in the *Junon* hill (Figure 1, n.17), explored with geophysical survey and trenching by a Polish team demonstrates evidence for traces of fire, probably connected with the Vandal breach and occupation (Iciek *et al.* 1974).

The continuity of manufacturing activities is attested by fifth-century pottery kilns investigated during the construction of the *Lycée* in the north east sector of the town (Figure 1, n.18) (Duval & Lézine 1959:79–84). Other production areas are known, such as the warehouses near the rectangular harbour (Figure 1, n.19–20) (*Sondage in Rue des Suffètes* in Ellis 1988:12–4; Stager 1978), the north sector of the circular harbour (Figure 1, n.21) (Hurst 1994), and the *Magon* quarter (Figure 1, n.22) (Rakob 1991:242–51). Some of these buildings, which had earlier been connected within a ‘corporate’ system (for an analysis of this system, De Robertis

1974, 1981:203–12), were now divided into small separate complexes, probably as a result of changes in the production system (Panella 1993:640–54).

What emerges from this short summary is how much fifth century Carthage had changed – archaeological evidence indicates a new urban image, where monumental public buildings had been abandoned or transformed into housing or burial areas, whilst other rich buildings continued in occupation. What is missing is any clear organisation within the town: public spaces, cemeteries, residential quarters and productive areas are no longer distinct and separate. Poor quality housing was built near rich *domi*; tombs lay inside the town, even if always in peripheral or completely abandoned areas; productive buildings were still in use, even if transformed and subdivided into smaller rooms; finally, churches reveal continuity of life or even the foundation of new religious buildings.

Considering all these elements, we can still see the late antique town as an urban area, even if completely different from the early imperial town. This new image that we might define, following Morrill (1974:25) as ‘a spatially restricted society’, is in contrast with the expansive image of early imperial times. This evidence is quite obvious when we perceive that the power which fostered such Roman town was no longer present, even if fragments of that power persisted and were enough to perpetuate the need for towns and urban life. This is the result of a change, which reflects firstly the historical, then the social and economic transformation (Hammond 1972: 303) – it was probably not as dramatic as we believe.

Towns and decay: perceptions in the historical sources

In considering this problem, it is useful to analyse the historical sources. Indeed, the concept of urban decay was common in ancient literature. Evidence of decay or abandonment of urban areas was often recorded during the Roman period. In the philosophical tradition, the conception of ‘universal caducity’ was discussed frequently, beginning with Cicero in *De Republica*, where a similarity between the life of a man and that of a state is identified (Cic. *Rep.* 1.3–4). The same theory is revived by Lucretius (*De Rer. Nat.* 2.1145–74), as well as in the later author Cyprianus (*Ad Demetrianum* 1; 2; 3). Ovid in his *Metamorphosis* (15; in particular on towns see 15.420) has Pythagoras discuss the concept of the universe governed by ‘continuous change’ (*panta rei*). In this conception everything in the world must die, even if death is not an annihilation, but rather transformation or rebirth (Labate 1991:167–84).

At the same time, we must also be aware that cities went into decay even before the late antique period. For example, between the end of the first century BC and the first century AD Strabo describes the decline of *Caere* and *Populonia* (*Geograph.* 5.2.3; 5.2.6); we can of course add the rather different case of Pompeii. The decay of some Italian towns is described by the fifth century poet Rutilius Namatianus in his *De Reditu* (1; see for instance on *Populonia* 1.400–28). Here the author seems absolutely unperturbed by this change and urban decay; his real interest is rather to depict the evidence of life (Lana 1961:175–8). This means that the perception of the ancient was probably different, while our approach to this problem is shaped by modern ideas. The image of the imperial town has often been considered as an element of comparison for the late antique town in our own culture; this is linked with our cultural background, shaped as it is by the Humanistic and Romantic ‘cult of the ruins’ (Lana 1961:175). For these reasons we can say that we have probably overemphasised an historical problem, trying to understand it in modern terms, rather than in those of late Antiquity.

Modern debates and disputes

Having reviewed all these aspects, we can now consider the debate on the late antique town. In recent years the study of this subject has stimulated much attention in the related problems of decay or continuity of life in towns from the Roman to the Medieval period. In this debate two different courses are identifiable. Following Ward Perkins (1997), these can be defined as ‘Catastrophists and Continuists’. The former identifies the evolution of the post-classical town

as a decline (Brogiolo 1987), or sometimes as a complete disappearance of the urban life (Carandini 1993). The latter, on the other hand, takes a more optimistic view and sees continuity of town life characterised by transformation and reuse of different classical buildings (La Rocca Hudson 1986; Wickham 1981). These opposed ideas have been connected with national cultural influence by Ward Perkins (1996). An intermediate approach has been recently suggested by Lepelley (1996:5): in late Antiquity we see both an evident breakdown and yet a surprising continuity of life. These transitions are connected with historical events. The weakening of the Roman Empire obviously prompted a new balance between social organisation and economic systems (Thébert 1983). In this process, classical towns were firstly 'de-constructed' and then 'reconstructed' in a new form (Ermini Pani 1998:214; Wataghin 1996).

In fact, it is necessary to point out that the 'classical city' was a particular type of town, characterised by a close involvement of the aristocracies in civic politics and urban culture. In considering the structure of power of the Roman Empire, towns were its most important expression, displaying in their public areas and buildings, a connection with the model of Rome (Luiselli 1992; Storoni Mazzolani 1967). The destiny of these towns reflects the evolution and the life of the Roman Empire. In this period it is possible to speak of a Roman urban organisation and of a starting point, provided by the model of Rome. We can also say that life in most towns during the expansion and apex of the Roman Empire had certain visible traits in common, especially related to public architecture, and, for this reason, it is legitimate to analyse and compare some elements of the different urban areas of this period. But, after the collapse of Rome, when the universal imperial model fails, their subsequent evolution is different. In the late antique period the lack of an all-embracing political and cultural structure leads to much greater regional diversity. For this reason, it is sometimes possible to compare towns within the same geographical areas, where the historical context is similar and where urban trajectories may be alike (cf. papers in Christie & Loseby 1996). Notwithstanding, as already shown in the case of Carthage, it is possible to single out characteristics that we can consider common to all late antique towns, despite the chronology and the geographical area. This is the effect of similarity in human character and human necessities, sometimes modified by different cultures (Blacking 1970:229).

The character of a late antique town: a review of some aspects.

Reviewing the archaeological evidence for the late antique town, we can identify common elements, which are characterised principally by the reuse and transformation of buildings belonging to the classical town (Caniggia 1973–4). Some aspects may be pointed out.

In considering the changing use of classical public buildings it is necessary to bear in mind that they usually had a specific function and this character shows that each of them was in use until a given moment, that is, as long as society needed that space. This means that the life of a public building tends to be shorter than the life of housing space, which is always necessary to a community; instead the changing of the public spaces is connected with the transformation of a key social group and its requirements. In considering the different types of classical public buildings in imperial towns we can enumerate: *fora*, baths, buildings for games and spectacles, temples. All of these were transformed and reused in different ways, always determined by the needs of the new society, resulting from the waning of Roman power and the emergence and diffusion of the Christian religion. For example, in Carthage the principal *forum*, the theatre and the odeon of the town (Picard & Baillon 1992) were partially occupied by private houses, during the sixth century. In these cases, we have a record of the transformation of public spaces into private ones, which is a common phenomenon of urban decay (Medhurst & Parry Lewis 1969:27–8, 55). But sometimes public spaces preserved their original public function as foci for the urban community. In fact, the diffusion of a new religion directs the reuse of some public buildings (especially baths, judicial *basilicae*, and, later, temples) as churches. We can cite the examples of *Tipasa*, *Sabratha*, *Leptis Magna*, in Northern Africa, where the judicial *basilicae*

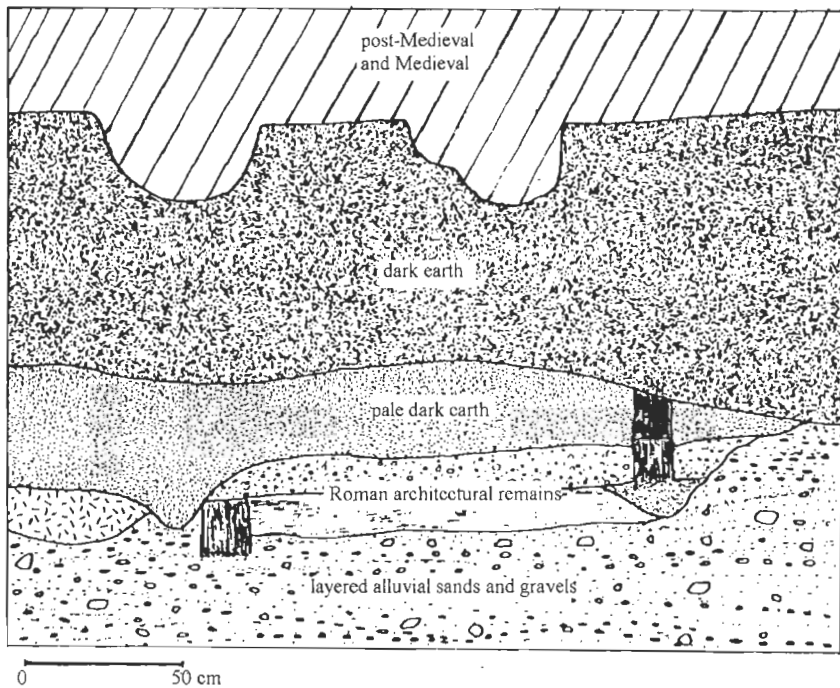


Figure 2 Hypothetical section at a dark earth site (Courty et al. 1989)

were transformed into churches (Caillet 1996:192); or the case of *Maktar*, where a church (Basilica IV) reused part of the bath (Thermes de l'Ouest) complex (Duval 1971:305–17). In addition there was a transformation of temples into ecclesiastical structures, as in *Thuburbo Maius*, where the *cella* was used as a baptistery (Caillet 1996:195), and *Oratoria* were built in the theatre and amphitheatre, as indeed at Carthage (Picard & Baillon 1992). Theatres and amphitheatres, as well as open areas, such as the *fora* were also often transformed into military and defensive structures. This reuse of public space points out, once more, that most of the areas that had been expressions of the power of Rome were given the new function of protecting the inhabitants. These new towns, where we can identify on one hand, the natural disappearance or rather decay of the monumental symbols of Rome, and on the other, the reuse of the same monuments for the needs of the inhabitants, are still organised as living spaces and so should be considered as such.

Another important element is the identification of meeting places, besides churches. In the countryside there were rural markets and we should imagine similar areas in towns, devoted to commercial exchange and social life, even if these areas were no longer monumentalised. In Carthage the north sector of the circular harbour in the sixth century was restored with an organisation very similar to the *soukh* of later Islamic towns (Hurst 1994:63, 81). The traditional fashion of considering religious buildings as the only meeting places in this period might be re-assessed – the example of Carthage shows that there were probably also other areas connected with such social activity in these towns.

The presence of graves inside the urban area can also be reconsidered. They show a new relationship between death/dead and life/living rather than simply decay; in fact the particular bond with the dead, the *cura animarum* clearly determined the necessity of closer proximity between houses and tombs. Significantly, especially in the earlier period we can recognise a planned intramural distribution of the tombs; as claimed, for instance at Rome, where fifth

century tombs inside the city are spatially organised around cultural areas and always in proximity to streets, rather than randomly across the town (Meneghini & Santangeli Valenzani 1993).

Recent research also requires us to re-assess the so-called 'dark earth', that is, dark-coloured and seemingly homogeneous urban occupation deposits (Courty *et al.* 1989:261). In the past, this archaeological evidence was considered to be connected with cultivated areas inside the city. Recently the same deposits have been interpreted alternatively as the decayed remains of poor structures, built of wood and mud brick (Courty *et al.* 1989:261–8). This modified perspective, (Figure 2) allows us to explore the relationship between the environment and the distribution of poor housing inside the town (Motta 1997:264). There has been a tendency to consider the continuity of use of principally Roman buildings, even if transformed according to new situations; but it should be kept in mind that there was also much poor housing. Further, many of these structures were connected with production areas, indicating self-sufficiency, in contrast with the earlier integrated Roman imperial system.

Conclusions

Considering all of these elements – the use of public buildings in new contexts, change connected with the reuse of private buildings, the construction of poorer quality housing and burial within the town – it is evident that the general image of the town is radically different from the imperial predecessor. This means that our approach to the evidence of late antique towns should be different from that used by classical archaeologists. Traces of human presence and their relationship with the environment are the main elements to interpret and understand urban life in late Antiquity (Carver 1981).

Borrowing the words of Parker Pearson & Richards (1994:3), 'our environment exists in terms of our actions and meanings'. This is even more appropriate after the decay of the Roman Empire, with its models and ways of expression, when the local inhabitants become the principal protagonists of the life of their town. The latter is now a space organised and controlled by the needs of individuals, and no longer the requirements of Rome. For this reason, even greater attention must be paid to social organisation, population and subsistence (Leech 1981:57–60). In approaching the study of any late antique town we should abandon our classical perspective; we should not consider the decay of Roman urbanism as a dramatic and final moment in urban history; but rather should value the late antique town in its own terms, considering its own particular economic and social character, its new meeting places, its relationship with the environment and its ties with relations of power.

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