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Review of:

Osborne, R. and Cunliffe, B. (eds.) 2005. *Mediterranean Urbanization 800-600 BC*. Proceedings of the British Academy 126. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 279 pages, illustrations, maps, plans. ISBN 0197263259. Hardback £40.00. No paperback edition.

Mediterranean Urbanization 800-600 BC publishes the proceedings of a 2001 British Academy conference. The 12 papers cover processes of urbanisation – and related changes in social and political organisation – in the Early Iron Age Mediterranean from Cyprus in the east to southern France and north-eastern Spain in the west. Though the book is of substantive interest to specialists in the eighth and seventh century BC Mediterranean, the theoretical approaches in certain papers would appeal to scholars of similar processes beyond this region. For its strengths in both areas – the presentation of new data and new analytical models – the book is likely to become required reading for students of this period.

In the introductory chapter, Robin Osborne comments on the current lack of attention paid to urbanisation by archaeologists in general, yet its continued interest to those working in the Mediterranean (cf. Damgaard Andersen et al. 1997). However, as Osborne observes, much recent work has been based on settlement in the countryside (based on regional survey data), cemeteries and sanctuaries rather than urban archaeology *per se*. One of the features of this volume is the attempt to integrate data from urban excavation with regional settlement patterns known largely through surface survey.

Following Osborne's introductory essay, eight authors present fairly broad, regional case studies of urbanisation, bringing data together and discussing methodological advances. In some cases, this is framed within a new interpretation of the process of urbanisation, such as François de Polignac's paper on Early Archaic Greece, in which he develops the idea of the polycentric city and the relationship between the development of urban space and the organisation of territory. Christopher Smith argues for a longer-term process of urbanisation of the city of Rome than that of 'standard' accounts, critiquing attempts to distinguish between proto-urban and urban phases of development. Other papers are less analytical, though still useful in terms of collecting data from dispersed publications and presenting them in a coherent argument. For example, in her discussion of Early Iron Age Cyprus, Maria Iacovou argues that state formation preceded urbanisation and stresses contrasts between the Cypriot and Greek situations: in Cyprus, the eighth century marked an intensification of a process of urbanisation that had begun in the 11th century BC, in contrast to the situation in Greece where, she argues, urbanisation was very much an eighth century phenomenon.

The book concludes with three broader, more thematic and theoretically-motivated papers. Corinna Riva links urbanisation to the orientalisising phenomenon in the Mediterranean, arguing that the latter provided the 'cultural setting' for the former.

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Observing the connection between communal living and orientalisation, she relates the different arenas for ritual displays of collectivity in Greece and Italy – namely sanctuaries and tombs – to the different contexts in the two regions for the consumption of oriental and orientalisating material culture. Lin Foxhall's paper also takes a consumption-based approach, using the concept of 'fashion' as an explanatory mechanism for the spread of certain material culture practices through the Mediterranean in this period, particularly the use of 'everyday luxuries' by increasing numbers of people. Finally, Nicholas Purcell offers a critique of static approaches to urbanisation, arguing for change as the norm of Mediterranean life, whether in terms of the landscape surrounding a city, the fabric of the city itself, its demography, or the social and political structures operating within.

Though dealing with diverse regions, a number of themes emerge from this book, indicating dominant positions within current thought about Mediterranean urbanisation. There is a marked departure from feature- or function-based 'check lists', whereby the urban character of a settlement would be defined either by its fabric (e.g. a fortification, a market, monumental architecture) or by the roles it fulfilled (e.g. craft specialisation, external trade). Osborne's alternative definition of a town as making certain social, political and economic activities possible through the relatively dense concentration of a relatively large population (p.13) is one suggestion, though the contributors to this volume by no means present a single, unified approach. Instead, authors emphasise the specificity of local circumstances and the need to avoid the uncritical transfer of 'criteria' of urbanisation from one region to another. For example, in his paper on the relationship between colonial settlement and urbanisation in the Western Mediterranean, Peter van Dommelen stresses that the 'meaning' of urban features differed in the colonies to the home regions, not denoting urbanisation – in the sense of integration in a regional settlement system or the fulfilment of urban functions – in the early colonial context, but rather 'foreignness' and self-containment. Peter Attema examines early urbanisation in three Italian regions – the Pontine Region, Salento Isthmus and Sibaritide – and concludes that although all three display features of proto-urbanisation, this is on a much smaller scale than observed in Etruria, and that the regions must therefore be understood on their own terms.

An emphasis on the importance of collectivity – the social as opposed to purely material aspects of urban living – and connectivity – the coevolution of towns and the networks they operated within – to processes of urbanisation is another common theme of the papers. Robin Osborne revisits the phenomenon observed by Anthony Snodgrass (1987: ch.6) of the failure of certain Greek settlements around 700 BC. Osborne's explanation is that there was a new requirement in the late eighth century for accessibility; being a relatively large and dense settlement was no longer enough, and towns emerged and thrived through increasing interaction and interdependence with other urban settlements. Dominique Garcia stresses the Greek colonial stimulus for the expansion of production and establishment of both a local exchange network and interaction with the Greek world in southern France and north-eastern Spain. It was participation in this exchange network that promoted the existence of towns. However, the influence of postcolonial thought is also apparent in this volume, with

a rejection of uncritical assumptions of the ‘civilising’, urbanising impact of colonial settlements in the western Mediterranean, and a consideration of indigenous processes. For Garcia, this includes recognition of the presence of sanctuaries gathering groups of people on a regular basis before the existence of towns. Van Dommelen recognises the development of indigenous settlement systems in Sardinia, contemporary with, yet independent from, the establishment of Phoenician colonies.

One of the strengths of this book is to unite papers dealing with different regions of the Mediterranean during the same period, of great benefit to scholars working on similar research questions in different geographical areas. Greece and Italy are, inevitably, best represented, making Garcia and Maria Eugenia Aubet’s papers (the latter on the location and Phoenician colonial status of the legendary island of Mainake) particularly welcome. Though it is recognised that urbanisation was well underway by this period in the Levant, papers dealing with the contemporary situation in this region and also North Africa would have broadened the geographical coverage.

The most successful papers are those that frame regional analysis with a strong theoretical model. Whilst Tom Rasmussen’s paper provides a useful overview of features of urbanisation in Etruria, it lacks argument and hence a sense of direction. Peter Attema’s paper, too, reads more like an interim report than a critical examination of previous work in the regions concerned and potential advances through the application of new methods and a comparative research design. Papers of this nature are likely to be of interest only to scholars and students of the immediate region and period concerned, whereas the arguments advanced by de Polignac or van Dommelen, applied here to Greece and the western Mediterranean respectively, are of wider interest and applicability. Osborne’s paper provides an excellent introduction to the theoretical knottiness of urbanisation as a topic within archaeological research, whilst Purcell’s contribution encourages an entirely different, dynamic approach to urbanisation, posing many unanswerable (e.g. ‘What was the half-life of an ancient townhouse?’ (p.267)) – but central – questions about how we conceive of communities and their interactions with built space.

As an Aegeanist whose research focuses on processes of orientalisation, I have to confess to a particular interest in the papers by Riva and Foxhall. Both are excellent applications of recent advances in anthropological theories of material culture, using the details of archaeological context to interpret how certain types of objects were employed in social and political strategies, and the properties of the objects that made them efficacious in such processes. At a more general level, these (and indeed other papers in the volume) provide further evidence that ‘classical archaeologists’ (broadly described) are increasingly engaged in wider theoretical debates within archaeology, and that for certain topics such as urbanisation – where researchers working in the Mediterranean have such rich data sets – they are at the very forefront of those advances.

References

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- Snodgrass, A. 1987. *An Archaeology of Greece. The Present State and Future Scope of a Discipline*. Berkeley and Oxford: University of California Press.